

INSIDE Wrestling

HOT WRESTLEMANIA RUMOR! **JOHN VS THE CENA VS ROCK**

**WHAT'S AHEAD
IN 2010
FOR WRESTLING'S
TOP STARS?**

VOLUME 31, 2010

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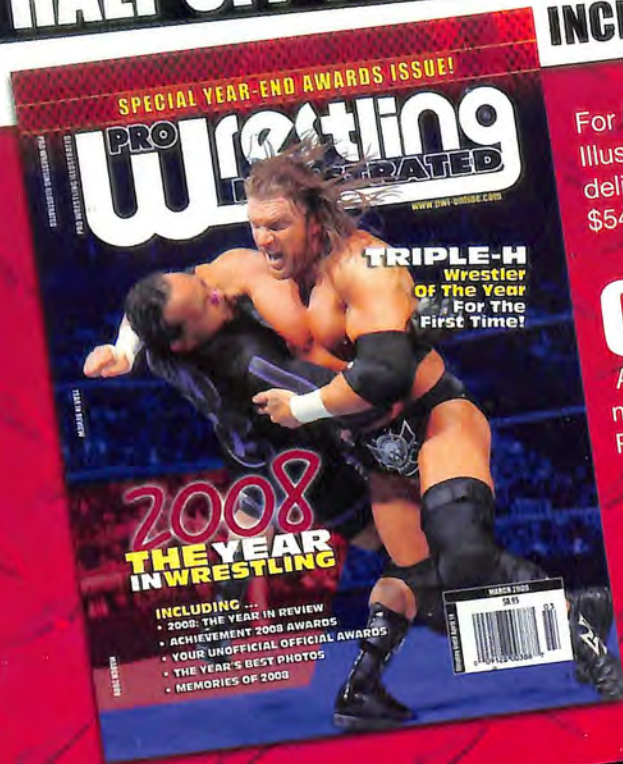


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inside wrestling

THE MAGAZINE THAT RIPS THE LID OFF PRO WRESTLING

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 **SINCERELY YOURS**
- 6 **NAMES MAKIN' NEWS** by Harry Burkett
- 12 **DATA SHEET: ODB**
- 13 **DATA SHEET: JACK SWAGGER**
- 14 **ON THE ROAD** with Dave Lenker
- 16 **THE INSIDER** by Brandi Mankiewicz
- 18 **CAPSULE PROFILE #351: JOHN MORRISON**
- 20 **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...BUTCHER VACHON?** by Mike Lano
- 22 **PLAIN SPEAKING** with Matt Brock
- 60 **EDITORS' ROUNDTABLE**
- 64 **WRESTLING TIMELINE: TRIPLE-H**
- 72 **ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS**
- 74 **CHECK OUT THIS SHOT!**

FEATURES

- 24 HOT WRESTLEMANIA 26 RUMOR: CENA VS. THE ROCK!**
The relationship between The Rock and John Cena is strange. Cena respects all The Rock has accomplished yet seems to resent it at the same time. That is why "The Champ" is pining for a match with The Rock at WWE's showcase event. Word is, this mega-bout is close to being signed

- 31 SPECIAL SECTION:**
WHAT'S AHEAD FOR WRESTLING'S TOP STARS IN 2010?
Here's how we think fate will treat the best and brightest in WWE, TNA, and ROH over the next 12 months

- 56 HOTSEAT: UNDERTAKER**
"I'm well enough to go out and beat anyone in WWE"

COVER PHOTOS:
John Cena © 2009 World Wrestling
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Miles Wachowiak

16



42



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BLESSING IN DISGUISE

While I was sorry to see John Cena leave Raw after losing to Triple-H, I believe it could actually be a blessing in disguise. Something had to be done to shake up Raw's main-event scene. There's only so much Triple-H vs. Orton vs. Cena I can take. And even though I'm a Cena fan, I grew tired of watching the same three wrestlers in the main event all the time. Cena's departure makes room for a Kofi Kingston or Evan Bourne or Jack Swagger to rise to the next level.

DIANE JACKSON
Buffalo, NY

A KNOCKOUT DEBUT

Wow! Is it just me or is Lacey Von Erich not the most strikingly beautiful Knockout in TNA? I had heard her name for a while, but I never actually saw her until her debut in late-September. Boy, was it worth the wait!

I don't expect her to wrestle like her father or uncles, but I know she can still be something special in the ring. Here's to hoping she's more than just another pretty face with a storied family.

SAM REYNOLDS
Salt Lake City, UT

[Editor's note: Don't worry, Sam, it's not you.]

CHARITABLE HOSTS

There has been a lot of debate over the good and bad points of the Raw guest host thing. But for all of its flaws, there is one great thing that is coming out of it: Some hosts have taken the time to promote good causes in hopes of getting more funding and/or attention.

I want to applaud Ben Roethlisberger (police, fire, and rescue support), Al Sharpton (education), Maria Menounos (AIDS awareness and research), and Nancy O'Dell (muscular dystrophy), who all took the opportunity to raise awareness for their charities. I also applaud Vince McMahon and WWE for giving them a platform on which to do it.

ALLEN COPLEAND
San Diego, CA

T FOR TUDE

Maybe Scott Steiner is a bad influence or maybe Booker T is getting just plain cranky in his advancing years, but it seems as if all I hear about Booker lately is that he's become quite the diva in TNA.

Whether it's refusing to help younger talent or walking out of matches, the once-affable and funny wrestler from Houston appears to be a



Lacey Von Erich's move set might be limited at this early point in her career, but reader Sam Reynolds of Salt Lake City, Utah, probably doesn't mind. It seems as if Sam's not paying much attention to Lacey's iron claw anyway.



For nearly 40 years, Capt. Lou Albano entertained wrestling fans worldwide. Even though Albano passed away in early-October, his impact on the industry will be felt for years to come.

changed man. If the rumors of such behavior are true, it might be time for Booker to step away from the game until he rediscovers his passion.

STEVEN BROWN
Austin, TX

FIGHTING CHAMPS

I know nobody likes Chris Jericho and The Big Show, but they sure can win. I wasn't surprised in the least when Jericho picked Show to be his partner, and it has proven to be the right choice. Complain all you want, but Batista and Rey Mysterio Jr. did not deserve to take the titles from them.

Y2J and Show are fighting champions who will face anyone, anytime, anywhere. Who could be angry with that?

And where have Rey and Batista been? Injured, injured, and more injured. For as much as they say they are great WWE competitors, they are constantly vying for a spot on the IR.

So you go ahead and cheer the much-beloved Rey and Batista. I'll stick with my fighting, and winning, champions—Jericho and Show.

DENISE CARTER
Stony Plain, Alberta

OH, CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN

Love him or hate him, wrestling fans have lost a true legend of the sport with the passing of Capt. Lou Albano. The man was larger than life and took showmanship to a new level.

Without Captain Lou, wrestling would have been stuck in the dry, plodding borefest it was before the mid-'80s. In years to come, people will look back and talk about how Lou Albano

helped create what we know today as "sports entertainment."

Rest in peace, Captain.

JOHN MARTIN
Plainview, TX

Although it has been years since I've watched wrestling on a regular basis, I was deeply saddened to learn that Capt. Lou Albano recently died. A piece of my childhood died with him.

As a kid, I was an intense wrestling fan that spent just about every Saturday morning parked in front of the TV set booing Albano with everything I had. At the time, he was merely a fat guy with a rubber band stuck in his face. Looking back, though, I can appreciate what a truly classic character he was—even before he helped take wrestling mainstream. I think the reason I no longer watch is because pioneers like Capt. Lou are no longer with us.

CHARLES DEAL
Islip, NY

[Editor's note: For more on the life and career of Captain Lou, flip over to The Wrestler, page 56.] □

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By Harry Burkett

THE BIGGEST STAR in the history of our sport, **Hulk Hogan**, has proven that even at age 56 and in the twilight of his career that he has the capacity to change the industry's landscape overnight. That's exactly what he did on October 27 when he launched his second autobiography, *My Life Outside Of Wrestling*, and subsequently announced his deal with TNA.

Hogan kick-started the "Hulkamania" buzz at a press conference in New York to promote his new book. He made several high-profile media appearances over the next few days, starting with a spot on NBC's *Today*. There, he addressed the most controversial passage in his book in which he admitted contemplating suicide in December 2007 at the height of the controversy involving his divorce from wife **Linda Bollea** and the prosecution of his son, **Nick Bollea**, for his role in an auto accident that left his friend **John Graziano** in a comatose state.

"It had me curling my index finger on the trigger of a loaded handgun and putting it in my mouth," Hogan

noted in *My Life Outside Of Wrestling*. He said that only a call from *American Gladiators* co-host **Layla Ali** interrupted him from the ultimate deed. Hogan blamed Linda for the negativity in their marriage, most notably her alleged alcoholism and frequent outbursts. He also discussed his sometimes-tense relationship with his daughter, **Brooke Hogan** immediately following the divorce and spoke fondly of his new girlfriend.

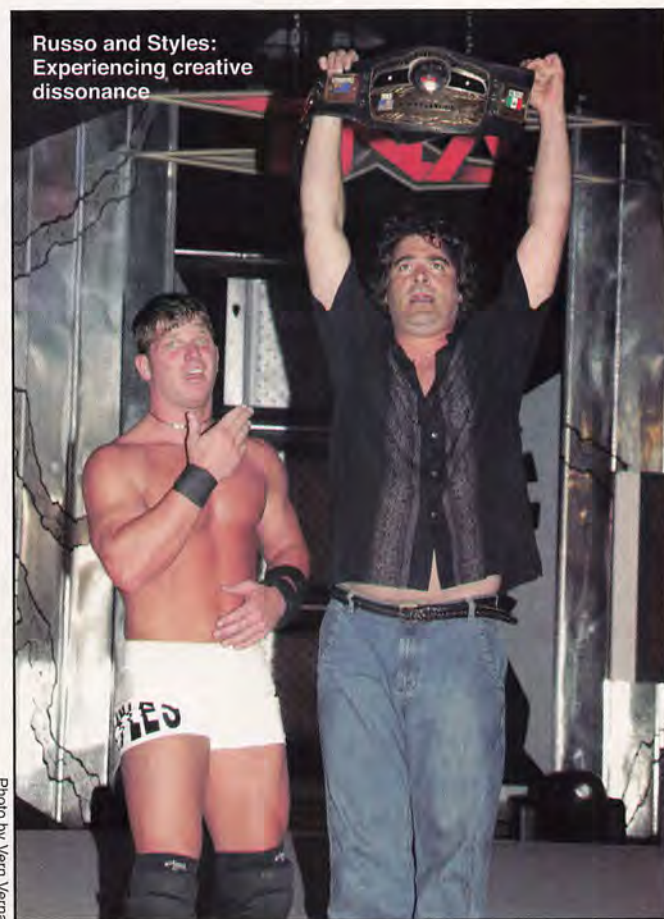
During his 40-minute appearance on *Larry King Live* that night, Hogan appeared with attorney **David Houston** to discuss his recent travails and to stress that he wrote the book to give hope to the millions of Americans who might be feeling despair during these trying economic times. Hogan appeared to be a sympathetic, wholly reasonable figure during the interview, although his revelation that he was friends with **James Arthur Ray**, the motivational guru allegedly responsible for the deaths of three followers and the hospitalization of 18 others related to a sweat lodge ritual gone wrong in Arizona, had the potential to undermine his credibility and sincerity among some viewers.

Of course, **Larry King**—a man who has interviewed countless wrestlers over years while retaining absolutely no knowledge of the sport—mentioned Hogan's wrestling comeback as an afterthought to conclude the segment. The six-time world champion acknowledged his Hulkamania tour of Australia set for November, his first in-ring appearances since defeating **The Big Show** at an independent show in Memphis in 2007. King also specifically asked Hogan about his new deal with TNA, although "The Hulkster" brushed off the specifics without plugging the promotion.

King also asked Hogan about reports that son Nick was in training to become a pro wrestler. And, in a revelation perhaps even more frightening than his near-suicide, Hogan confirmed that Nick was indeed interested in a wrestling career. Why do I get the feeling that Nick has the potential to make **David Flair** look like **Karl Gotch**?

Of course, that tidbit was something TNA President **Dixie Carter** did not acknowledge when she praised her company's new association with the legendary star. "Our goal is to become the biggest professional wrestling company in the world," stated Carter at a New York City press release. "Hulk defines professional wrestling and we look forward to partnering with him in a variety of ways as we continue to grow TNA worldwide."

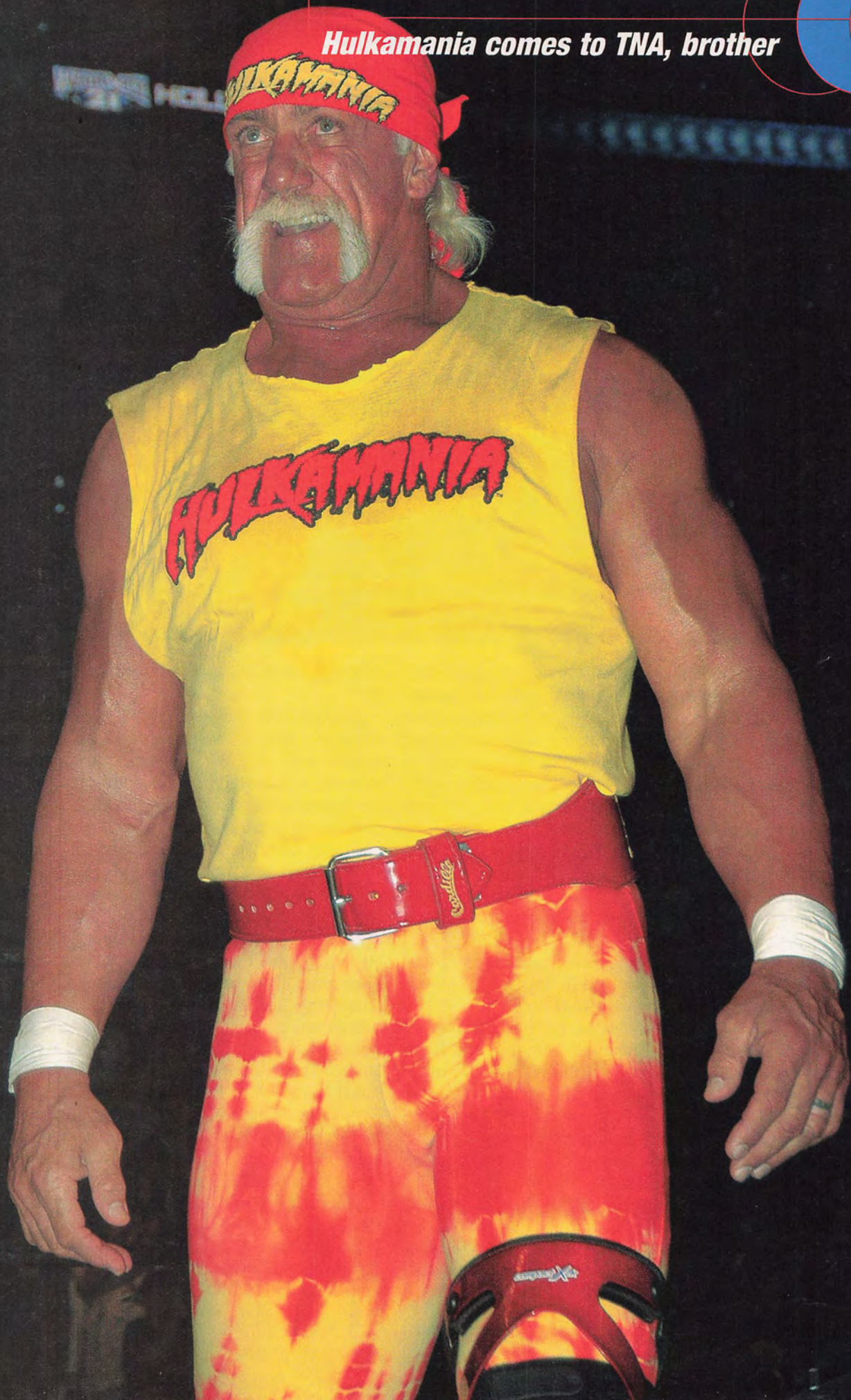
Hogan later confirmed his enthusiasm for the new relationship. "My fans have been asking me to return to the business for many years on a full-time basis, but the

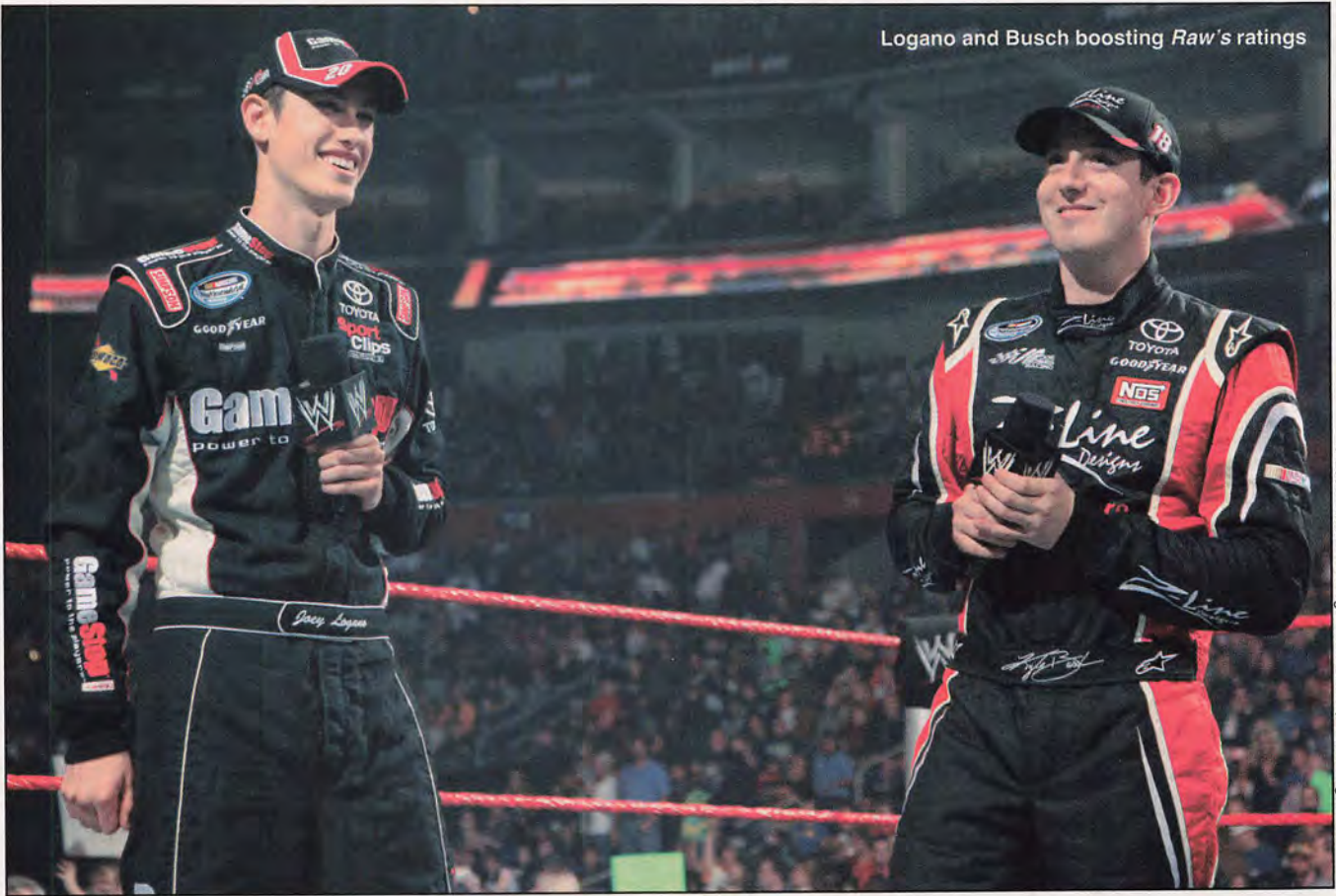


Russo and Styles:
Experiencing creative
dissonance

Photo by Vern Verma

Hulkamania comes to TNA, brother





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timing or the opportunity has never been right until now," said Hogan. "TNA Wrestling is a great company with an already excellent fan base and business. I firmly believe now is the time for TNA to jump to the next level in their development and I'm here to help make that a reality."

The former champ's deal with TNA has created plenty of controversy, and controversy creates cash, at least according to yet another new TNA associate, **Eric Bischoff**. Yes, the former WCW president—through his relationship with Hogan and Bischoff-Hervey Entertainment's new deal with TNA to help extend its programming—may be entering the promotion through the back door.

All of this comes at a time when backstage rancor appears to be at an all-time high in TNA. **Kevin Nash** recently blew his top when he watched **Brother Ray** plant **Chris Sabin** with a vicious Bubba Bomb at an *Impact* taping. Sabin was severely stunned, and Nash complained because no one—not the referee, the wrestlers, or those calling the shots in the production truck—ordered a stop to the match. Nash's instincts were probably correct, as Sabin sustained a concussion. It's ironic that Nash, who once mocked the X division, has become one of its most fervent defenders.

There have been other rumors as well, everything from **Samoa Joe** becoming miffed because TNA didn't use a friend's catering company while in Los Angeles for *Bound For Glory*, to **A.J. Styles** finally losing his cool with creative head **Vince Russo** because of his sense

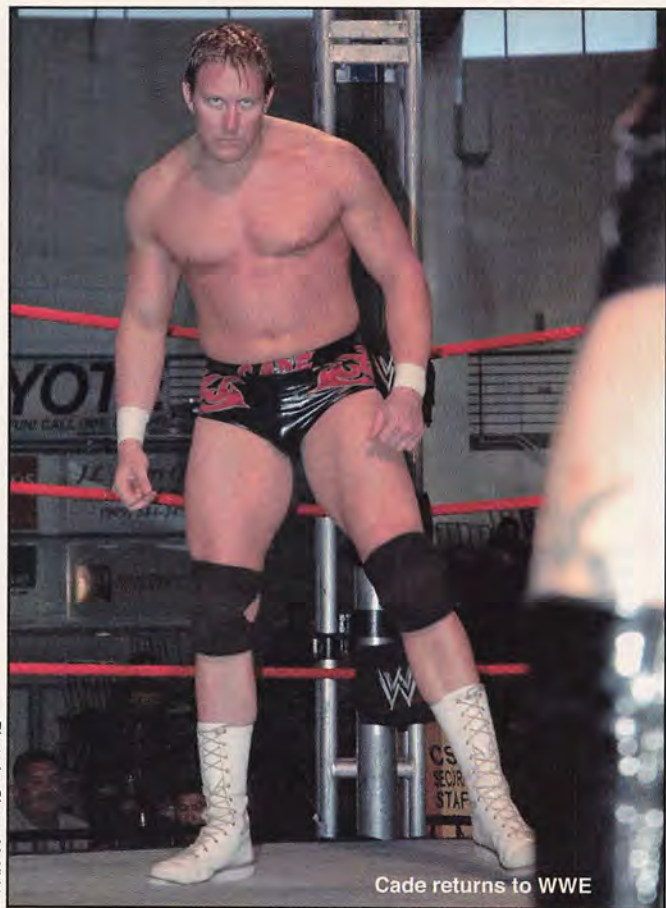
that he's being depicted as a weak TNA World champion.

Doesn't TNA sound a lot like WCW these days? In terms of a potential Monday Night War with Hogan, even possibly with **Ric Flair** on board, that could be great. But in terms of backstage cohesiveness, it could spell disaster. It seems that TNA really needs **Jeff Jarrett** back in the fold as a locker-room leader, but it's likely that the potential combination of Hogan, Bischoff, and **Kurt Angle** would steamroll him at this point.

Of course, WWE has had its share of controversy, due to the stunning departures of **Linda** and **Shane McMahon** (which is covered extensively in "What's Happening" on *The Wrestler* side of this issue). But business appears to be good even during tough economic times. The October 26 edition of *Raw* was clocked at an overall rating of 3.7, thanks to the Bragging Rights pay-per-view the previous night and the appearances of NASCAR drivers **Kyle Busch** and **Joey Logano** as guest hosts. While Busch and Logano made **Susan St. James** at *WrestleMania II* seem downright articulate, there's no denying their drawing power. With 5.59 million viewers, this episode of *Raw* outpaced even the **Bob Barker** edition on September 7.

Soon after Dixie Carter acknowledged that it might be more effective for TNA to run only six pay-per-views a year, WWE seems to be headed in that direction, at least acknowledging that less could mean more. WWE has been running 15 pay-per-views per year, which seems

NEWS ANALYSIS



Cade returns to WWE

like a lot considering the brand extension no longer applies to PPVs. The schedule seemed particularly congested immediately following WrestleMania, when it was thought WWE should simmer down a tad after so much 'Mania hype. As a result, Judgment Day—which has been in existence since 1998—is set for the ashbin of wrestling history and Extreme Rules will move from early-June to late-May.

Apparently, **Lance Cade** will not be joining former championship tag team partner **Jethro Holliday** (formerly known as Trevor Murdoch) in TNA. Cade has resigned with WWE and he is now tuning up in Florida Championship Wrestling. His role in the company remains unclear. He has been touted as a sidekick for **C.M. Punk**, who is in severe need of additional muscle in his current feud with World champion **The Undertaker**. Cade served in a similar role for **Chris Jericho** last year. There has also been talk of pairing him with fellow Shawn Michaels Wrestling Academy graduate **Bryan Danielson**.

WWE released Cade in 2008 after he suffered a seizure during an airplane flight, raising concern about violations of the company's Wellness Policy.

In what has become a tradition for Ring of Honor, the promotion plans to run two shows during the weekend of WrestleMania 26 in the host city for that event, Phoenix, Arizona. Both events will be held at Phoenix College. There is an 8 p.m. show on Friday, March 26, and a 2 p.m. card on Saturday, March 27, before the WWE Hall

IS "THE HUCKSTER" BACK? Hulk Hogan depicts the past two years of his life as a period of deep soul-searching and re-evaluation of priorities. Or is this yet another attempt at reinvention to make his comeback more palatable to the public? By touting his ties to James Arthur Ray and admitting that he would be interested in doing a reality series about his current home life, Hogan lacks credibility. Hasn't he learned anything?

TURMOIL IN TNA. It's easy to maintain the "rah-rah" team spirit when a promotion is struggling for a foothold. But that becomes much more difficult once the promotion achieves higher visibility. Bigger paydays are at stake, and people just plain get sick of each other over time. Dixie Carter's main priority right now should be to make sure her stars are acting on behalf of the company, it that's never been Hogan's modus M.O.

THE GUEST HOST DILEMMA. In my opinion, the guest-host concept has resulted in less wrestling, infantile storylines, and making Vince McMahon's "superstars" look like wusses. I mean, really, should The Big Show even flinch a nerve when Joey Logano is in his face? But the numbers don't lie, and the concept is successful. It looks like we'll have to endure the silliness, my friends.

REAL WARRIORS. We always feel sorry when John Cena, Batista, or Matt Hardy suffers the latest torn biceps or abdominal tear, as we should. But I have particular sympathy for the unheralded weekend warriors, especially a multi-decade veteran such as "Luscious" Johnny Graham, who suffers a major injury and must recover in relative obscurity with no daily updates from the WWE Universe. Here's to you, Mr. Graham.

DIMMING STAR-POWER ON INDY CIRCUIT? As TNA grows as a business, it's inevitable the company will tighten the reins on its talent, expanding booking schedules and restricting independent appearances. Will the catfights between Velvet Sky and Christy Hemme become a thing of the past? I hope not. It helps for the big stars to return to their roots every now and then.

of Fame ceremony. Of course, 'Mania 26 will take place on March 28.

International champion **Kid Kash** continues to be one of Showtime All-Star Wrestling's greatest assets ... and the bane of its existence. When SAW officials recently presented **Rick Morton** a lifetime achievement award, Kash arrived on the scene and insulted his former mentor. He said the only notable accomplishment of Morton's career was training him. Kash's ongoing verbal feuds with matchmaker **Reno Riggins**, Commissioner **Freddie Morton**, and all of the fans at the Sawmill are bound to

reach a boiling point.

Incidentally, Kash successfully defended his title against **Al Snow**, who was substituting for an injured **Bob Holly**, at SAW's first show at the Nashville Fairgrounds. More than 700 fans were in attendance.

News from the Elite Pro Wrestling Alliance: "**High Tide**" **Bodie Williams** suffered a torn meniscus during a recent match and will be out of action for several months ... Heavyweight champion **Jake Davis** may be the only man to stop the rampage of the "**Living Nightmare**" **Griffen** ... Up-and-comer **Jason Riggs** is looking to use 11-year veteran **Leslie Leatherman** as a steppingstone, but has been unsuccessful thus far ... **Jim Duggan** assumed a three-point stance and used his famed running tackle to defeat **Vincent Vega** ... The EPWA runs shows primarily in Maryland and West Virginia.

This 'n' that: Former Ring of Honor champion **Nigel McGuinness**, who joined TNA under the name **Desmond Wolfe**, disputes rumors that WWE refused to sign him to a contract because of his failure to pass a pre-screening medical evaluation ... **Daffney** suffered a concussion when she landed hard on a table at Bound for Glory ... TNA's contract with **Scott Steiner** is due to expire soon. There is no word on how renegotiations are coming along ... WWE announced that WrestleMania 25 brought \$50-million to the economy of Houston ... The



Graham: Suffering in silence

Photo by Tim Walker



Hemme vs. Velvet: Back to their roots

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

NWA has reached a licensing deal with controversial toy-maker Jakks Pacific. I can't wait for the **Dick Hutton** legends action figure ... **Paul London** is in the midst of a comeback, pursuing Northeast Wrestling champion **Jason Blade** ... Pro Wrestling Entertainment champion **Shane Valentine's** relentless attack on **Johnny Graham's** arm during a recent title defense resulted in the veteran suffering a ruptured distal biceps. He was rushed to a local hospital and required immediate surgery. He will be out for possibly a year ... MCW cruiserweight champion and 2009 Shane Shamrock Cup winner **Ryan McBride** defeated arch-enemy **Teddy Stigma** in a steel cage loser-leaves-Maryland match ... **John Rambo** has returned from injuries and regained the National Wrestling League title from **Shane Shadows**. **Nikolai Volkoff** has requested and been granted a Russian chain match against the new champion.

From the It's A Tough Job But Someone's Got To Do It Dept.: The feud between TNA Knockouts **Velvet Sky** and **Christy Hemme** has spilled into Northeast Wrestling. The seeds for this rivalry were planted a couple of years ago when **Ron Simmons**, serving as a judge, deemed Hemme—and not Velvet Sky—the winner of a swimsuit contest. The two women are finally taking their issues to the ring, as they're set for an upcoming showdown in NEW. **Kurt Adonis**, who was forced to retire last year due to nagging injuries, has been assigned the task of refereeing the bout.

"I plan on calling the match straight down the middle, and I won't hesitate to mix it up with either of those ladies," said Adonis. The "Purty One" was accused of utilizing unnecessary "catch-as-catch-can" exchanges during a series of mixed matches involving Velvet Sky a couple of years ago.

Before we part, I wish to offer my condolences to the family and friends of **Capt. Lou Albano**, who recently passed away. Please flip to our tribute to the Captain on page 56 of *The Wrestler*. □

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ODB

HEIGHT: 5'7"

WEIGHT: 165

HOMETOWN: Minneapolis, Minnesota

GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE:

September 20, 2009—At No Surrender, in the Impact Zone, ODB defeats her "boyfriend" Cody Deaner to win her first TNA Knockouts championship. The decisive win ends Deaner's campaign to be recognized as the Knockouts champion.

SHE DOES IT SO WELL: When it comes to aggressiveness, both inside and outside the ring, ODB plays second fiddle to no other Knockout. She will willingly bite, claw, or scrape her way to the top of the heap, overcoming virtually any of the perceived "Barbie Dolls" thrown her way.

WHERE SHE NEEDS TO IMPROVE:

ODB's repertoire is largely power-based, with slams designed to take down many of her smaller peers. Where she actually could stand to improve is in her technical game, as this would give ODB a better chance of outlasting women she might not overpower, such as Awesome Kong. She also might want to consider taking fewer tugs on her flask.

PET FINISHER: Dirty Dozen

BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: On the January 29, 2009, episode of *Impact*, which was overtaken by the Main Event Mafia, ODB, a committed member of the Frontline, found herself opening the card against Kongtourage in a handicap match. After holding off the quartet of Rhaka Khan, Sojo Bolt, Raisha Saed, and Awesome Kong for close to six minutes, ODB finally succumbed to a Kong implant buster. Given the odds against her, the outcome could've been much worse.

OUTLOOK FOR 2010: ODB sits at the top of a strong women's roster, and looks to remain at least near that spot in the foreseeable future. Because TNA is always bringing in new female talent, ODB should never starve for fresh competition, and, with the introduction of a Knockouts tag team title, she has even more opportunity to stay near the top.

QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "ODB is the type of competitor you fear. She's so unpredictable that the only thing you know is that when you wrestle her, you're going to hurt afterward."

—Tara



Photo by Lee South / TNA Wrestling

JACK SWAGGER

HEIGHT: 6'6"

WEIGHT: 263

HOMETOWN: Perry, OK

GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: January 13, 2009—In Sioux City, Iowa, Jack Swagger captures his first WWE singles championship—the ECW title—in a Syfy Network match against Matt Hardy. The win comes nearly four months to the day of his WWE debut. Swagger goes on to hold the belt for 104 days, successfully defending it against challengers such as Hardy, Finlay, Tommy Dreamer, and Christian.

HE DOES IT SO WELL: As his name indicates, Swagger exudes confidence. From the day WWE recruited him for his strong amateur background, he was regarded as a can't miss, blue-chip prospect. Today, Swagger can outwrestle anyone in WWE on any given night. Knowing that fact makes him all the more dangerous.

WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: There is a fine line between confidence and arrogance, and most of Swagger's key losses in WWE have come when he's underestimated the ability of his opponent. In spite of his tremendous talent, Swagger is far too easily distracted by his own hype.

PET FINISHER: Falling gutwrench power bomb

BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: Since moving to Raw, Swagger is no longer the big fish in the small pond. Each week, he has to contend with the pressures of competing against more talented and experienced opponents, and on live television, no less. Swagger made the right decision to target the U.S. title, but he will need to perform at his absolute peak to take that belt home.

OUTLOOK FOR 2010: Swagger possesses the ability to headline either Raw or Smackdown as a WWE heavyweight or World champion. Whether or not he achieves this so early into his tenure with the company, however, remains to be seen. Certainly, though, the U.S. title is not beyond his grasp.

QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "Jack has taken me to my limit quite a few times this year. Fortunately, he can be his own worst enemy at times." —Christian



Photo by Matt Roberts

With Dave Lenker

FOLLOW SPORTS FOR enough years and you'll hear the experts tell you that there are certain things you just can't be too quick to judge as a fan. One thing in particular is a draft.

Draft day is always one of the special days on the calendar of any dedicated National Football League fan. But if your team's picks don't end up playing a prominent role, well, what a lousy draft that was, right? Oftentimes it takes a year or two for those precious draftees to develop into NFL starters and, eventually, into NFL stars.

Patience, my friends.

You might remember that Vince McMahon instituted his own offbeat "draft" a while back. No, not the ridiculously over-hyped and now borderline pointless annual brand draft, either. It was the better part of a decade ago that WWE gave us a little show called *Tough Enough*. It debuted on MTV and offered up the ridiculous concept that someone could basically walk in off the street and earn a WWE contract. For those who have joined the fraternity of wrestling fans since *Tough Enough* went away, I'm oversimplifying just a bit. But it started as a weekly 30-minute reality show full of drama played out over a few months, ala *Survivor*, but the ultimate goal was to add two athletes to WWE's roster.

Most of us liked or even loved the show itself, but even many of those who loved it laughed at the idea of grooming new superstars that way.

Patience, my friends.

Eight-plus years later, I am officially declaring *Tough Enough* an overwhelming success. It struck me early this fall while watching John Morrison and Matt Morgan take

steps toward the pinnacle of the sport. I really started thinking about it, for whatever reason, when I saw Morrison's image gracing one of the covers of this very magazine (for the first time) on the previous issue. Remember where we got those two gentlemen? That's right: It all started on *Tough Enough*.

WWE and TNA, respectively, would be making big mistakes if these two men weren't holding world



Morgan knows that his time to be on top in TNA is near. Though WWE didn't give him much of a chance, Morgan has proven to be one of the more memorable alumni from *Tough Enough*.

championship gold sooner rather than later. Both have improved in a big, big way in just the past six months. Morgan has always had the size and look, but I didn't see this surge coming from Morrison. Since he joined Smackdown, he has been one of the most entertaining stars on the entire WWE roster. Morgan would look pretty good there alongside him (or even next to The Miz, another TE alumnus, on Raw), but WWE had its chance and blew it there. Yeah, sorry, Vince, he just signed a new long-term deal with TNA.

I'd say two big stars (three depending on your feelings on The Miz) created over four seasons of a ridiculous reality show is a pretty good record. Seriously. Some NFL teams would love to do as well in a draft.

Perhaps a brief recap is in order. The winners of the first season of *Tough Enough* (2001) were Maven Huffman and Nidia Guenard. WWE stuck with both for a few years, but neither ended up being any more than a marginal prospect. A few of the also-rans had decent careers on the indy circuit, and Chris Nowitski might still be in WWE today if not for a career-ending concussion. The Harvard graduate has become an advocate for those affected by concussions and quite an expert on the subject. Incidentally, the first season of *Tough Enough* also gave us Josh Matthews, who is masterful in his ability to hold a microphone to the face of a wrestler and ask the most obvious of questions.

Season Two's winners were Jackie Gayda, who has logged time in both WWE and TNA, and Linda Miles, who was the source of daily headaches for Jim Cornette when he was training her and her attitude in OVW and later portrayed a hor-

rendous faux dominatrix manager of The Basham Brothers in WWE. (I'd like to think Morgan would have won over Linda had a knee injury not knocked him out of the Season Two competition.)

On a personal level, I'm sure Charlie Haas, Gayda's husband, is thankful for *Tough Enough* every time he gazes down at that big, bouncing, beautiful pair of ... children Gayda has given him.

Season Three gave us a fresh-faced kid named Matt Cappotelli and a young punk named John Hennigan as our winners. Cappotelli seemed to have a terrific future in wrestling ahead of him until he was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. Hennigan, mean-

while, became Johnny Nitro, one-time assistant to Raw GM Eric Bischoff. Now Nitro has become John Morrison, Smackdown's fastest-rising star.

Daniel Puder was the big winner of the fourth and final installment, which morphed into weekly segments on *Smackdown* rather than a full-fledged series on MTV. That season also gave us Marty "The Boogeyman" Wright, Nick Mitchell (the Spirit Squad's Mitch), and The Miz.

It's a credit to Morrison, Morgan, and Miz that we hardly think of them as former reality show contestants any longer. I suppose it's a credit to everyone in the sport who has helped in molding them into the stars they are today and could be (even more so) tomorrow. If we go back to the previous issue of this

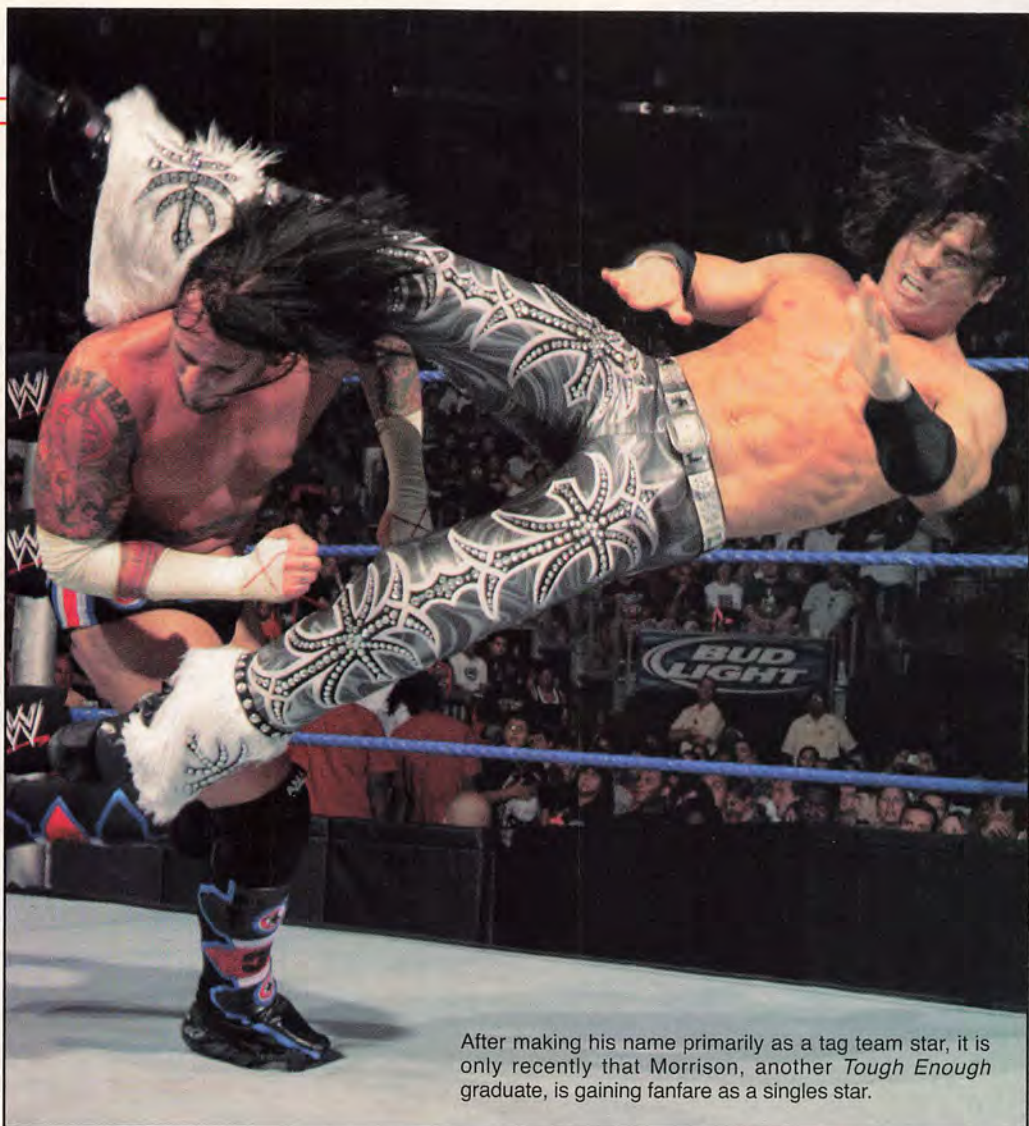
magazine again, both Morgan and Morrison were the subjects of in-depth features, and in those two features, *Tough Enough* was mentioned all of once, and that one time was in passing.

I'd love to see *Tough Enough* return to the WWE TV schedule in its original form. We certainly could stand to see something different on the WWE menu, and WWE *Superstars* hardly qualifies as different. That, of course, would take a significant commitment on WWE's part financially and otherwise, and I know it isn't likely to happen. Instead maybe we can just take a lesson from *Tough Enough* all these years later.

I wrote about patience on the part of fans at the beginning of this column. But in sports such as baseball

and football, team executives are the ones who do tend to exhibit some patience when it comes to drafts and young talent. They don't expect even their most promising prospects to lead the team right away. Among wrestling power brokers, patience is in shorter supply now than it has ever been. I've written about it before, but Vince McMahon and his brethren are more willing than ever to give up (read: relegate to mid-card status at best) on potential new stars if they don't make something special happen right away.

Morrison and Morgan are proof that you can start with nothing in this crazy business and still make it pretty big if the people calling the shots take a deep breath and show a little—you guessed it—patience. □



After making his name primarily as a tag team star, it is only recently that Morrison, another *Tough Enough* graduate, is gaining fanfare as a singles star.

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By Brandi Mankiewicz

WHY DO I do this to myself every year? The Super 8 is one of the greatest independent wrestling events in the sport, but I always find myself spending it with Dan Murphy. You know it's bad when even Liz Hunter shoots me a quick e-mail to let me know she shares my pain since she was forced to share many road trips with the illustrious yet deeply disturbed Eddie

Ellner. I'm sure nut-cruncher Eddie's strange eating habits had nothing on Murph's bizarre lifestyle. I guess they do share a plant-based diet, though. Eddie liked bean sprouts and tofu. Dan likes hops-based beer.

I met Dan in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where I had catnapped at a relative's house. I woke up in a dazed state and somehow inadvertently smacked my face into a door

frame as I groggily walked to the bathroom. Voila! A raging nose-bleed. Too bad I forgot to wear my white T-shirt. Steve Corino would chastise me for the already red shirt I was sporting for this bloodletting. Of course, as I'm trying to cauterize the bleeding, Murph pulls up in his brand new car. He strolls up to the door and I notice a cast on his right hand. Guess who offers to drive. Yep, the one-armed bandit himself. Luckily, I can bleed all over the interior of his new car.

Yep, this is going to be one doozy of a trip.

We proceed to make our way to Delaware, weaving in and out of traffic in "soon-to-be-shown-on-

Cops" style. Our conversations range from our last Super 8 trip to who is in this year's tournament. Dan's confused by the lack of bigger-named competitors while I'm happy that it's going back to the home-grown local boys. Our conversation is interrupted constantly by a female voice bellowing from his GPS. Yes, Mr. Gadget brought along his newest toy to annoy me. Like I don't know how to go to Delaware. I've only been going there all of my life (sigh).

We finally squeeze through the bottleneck traffic that is Filthadelphia and arrive at our hotel. Unfortunately, the whole Newark, Delaware, area was bustling with some stupid gathering at University of Delaware, so there were slim pickings for hotels. We had to call in a favor with our friend and independent wrestling journeyman Keith Whisenant to get us a room at one of his hotels. While we were thankful we got a room, having to deal with the turtle lady at the front desk slowly process our request was excruciating. While we giggled at her Lindsay Lohan in five years appearance, her molasses speed left us late for dinner with several of the wrestlers and promoter Jim Kettner.

The annual pre-Super 8 dinner is nothing special. It's a bunch of wrestling types getting together in a relaxed atmosphere to blow off some steam before the next day's hectic events. I quickly realized that I was not the one driving, so I ordered a cranberry juice and vodka in honor of my favorite Russian, Alex Koslov. It was sad to know that he was in Mexico and not in Delaware enjoying libations with me. As we enjoyed each other's company telling tales of wrestling lore, my phone vibrated with a message. B.J. Race,



Photos by Joe Zanolle

With his capture of this year's Super 8 trophy, Nick Logan cemented his place in ECWA lore. As Brandi Mankiewicz points out, a Super 8 victory often leads to a bright future.



Although the 2009 Super 8 lineup didn't boast as much star power or aerial bombast as some previous years, Mankiewicz enjoyed watching ECWA "go back to basics."

wife of Harley and backbone of his wrestling promotion World League Wrestling and his training school, had passed away. Not a good note for the night. Unfortunately, that's when Kettner also decided to tell me that Capt. Lou Albano wasn't doing too well. I ordered a double cran-vodka that would make my Uncle Matt Brock proud. I think ECWA champion Bazooka Joe was horrified with the amount of alcohol one tiny female can put away—and I mean me, not Murph.

Saturday's Shopping With Murphy Day. Cruising the mall is a time-honored indy wrestling tradition, this trip did not disappoint. I was able to not only watch Dan turn into a girl with his Macy's addiction, but I also got to once again buy underwear for cheap. I was also able to buy a piece I needed to fix my favorite bra. Gotta love sales! A quick lunch at Famous Dave's for barbecue and we were off to the show.

Our fellow INSIDE WRESTLING brethren filed into the near-empty building, and the afternoon turned into the company reunion of sorts. It was interesting to hear how many

different stories Dan could devise to address his casted hand. Meanwhile, I'm changing out tissue pieces from my still-bleeding nose. We all stood about talking while photographer Joe Zanolle was busy doing studio shots of nearly every wrestler there. I just stood back and watched. It's nice to no longer have to be the one lining everyone up for poses. I don't miss those days.

Instead, I spent my time talking with Dave Lenker and Murph. Dave is a great guy with a really quick wit, so he's a ball of fun. Dave quickly asked "Who is that in the swine flu gimmick?" as Makaze walked past with his face covered by his scarf thingy.

This event was not only a reunion with my magazine buddies, but it was a chance to reconnect with a few friends I haven't seen in a while. Metal Master was in all the way from England and Quiet Storm had just returned from a long stay in Japan. It was even good to see Prince Nana, who is looking really spiffy these days.

Now, I had chosen a shirt with a plunging neckline for the occasion.

Nothing too revealing, but it was open fairly low onto my torso. I didn't think much of it until Brian Socia and Mozart Fontaine both motorboated my chest. Luckily, they're friends of mine, so it was more funny than awkward. I chalked it up to them being Chick Magnets and secretly plotted my revenge. Hey, their teammate, Mike Tobin, may have gotten the coveted spot in the tournament, but they got to do something better. Or at least they better think that!

Showtime rolled around and Murph pulled out a digital voice recorder. It seems that Mr. Reporter here can't take notes for the event because of his hand, so he was going to speak the pertinent details into this little device. What a trooper. Dave Lenker and I proceeded to mock Dan in every way possible.

The tournament itself was interesting. It might not have featured the strongest field of international competitors, but it was still exciting. I hope the fans appreciated it. Not every year can be a high-flying train wreck featuring aerialists. I like that this year's edition went back to the basics. Hard-fought victories have a greater purpose than the aerial displays of the past. For me, it was like watching the first year or two of the tournament—back when it was special for just the ECWA fans. Nick Logan's win solidified his place on the ECWA roster. The fact that he now shares a lineage with some of the greatest independent wrestlers who went on to WWE or TNA is just a side note this year. I think it's also important that the tournament changes with the times, doing what it needs to survive. Now, if I could only get some tips from the tournament on how to survive another road trip with Murph ...

BORN IN LOS ANGELES in 1979 ... Attended the University of California at Davis ... Studied film and geology ... Began training for wrestling career at Supreme Pro Wrestling School in Sacramento ... Auditioned for WWE's *Tough Enough II*, but did not make the cut ... Tried again and was accepted for *Tough Enough III* ... Met future girlfriend and on-screen manager Melina during auditions ... Melina did not make the cast ... Won the competition, along with Matt Cappotelli ... Was awarded a WWE developmental contract ... Competed in Bar Room Brawl match at Vengeance in July 2003 ... Teamed with Cappotelli on an episode of *Heat*, losing to Garrison (Lance) Cade and Mark Jindrak ... Debuted on *Raw* as an assistant to GM Eric Bischoff ... Started under the name Johnny Blaze, but was Johnny Spade the following week ... Finally settled on Johnny Nitro, a nod to Bischoff's years at the helm of *WCW Nitro* ... Even used old *Nitro* theme song as his entrance music ... Lost match to Eugene and was fired by Bischoff ... Returned to OVW and feuded with Cappotelli ... Melina entered OVW at this time, as a former girlfriend of Nitro aligned with Cappotelli ... Before long, she turned on Cappotelli and joined Nitro ... Joey Mercury joined Nitro and Melina, forming M-N-M ... Team defeated Mac Johnson and Seth Skyfire for OVW Southern tag team title ... Lost straps to Cappotelli and Johnny Jeter about two months later ... Called up to the Smackdown roster in April 2005 ... Won WWE tag team championship

from Rey Mysterio Jr. and Eddie Guerrero in their debut ... Made successful defenses against Mysterio and Guerrero, and the team of Hardcore Holly and Charlie Haas ... Lost belts to Heidenreich and Road Warrior Animal at 2005's Great American Bash ... Regained them in a four-way match that also included the Mexicools and William Regal and Paul Burchill ... Lost and regained the title from Mysterio and



It might have taken John Morrison a few tries before settling on a name, but there has never been any question about his ability in the ring.

Batista within a 12-day span ... Dropped the title again, this time to Paul London and Brian Kendrick ... Nitro and Melina turned on Mercury after the loss and were fired by Smackdown GM Theodore Long ... Nitro and Melina debuted on *Raw* the following week ... Nitro lost to John Cena in his first match ... Defeated Shelton Benjamin and Carlito in a triple-threat match to win first Intercontinental title ... Began a feud with Jeff Hardy that would see the I-C title traded back and forth ... Feuded sporadically with John Cena throughout 2006 ...

Trained Kevin Federline for his *Raw* match against Cena ... Reunited with Mercury, but lost to the Hardys at December to Dismember ... Lost to Jeff Hardy in I-C title steel cage match at New Year's Revolution ... M-N-M disbanded for good when Mercury was released in March 2007 ... Melina soon went her own way, focusing on her WWE Women's title aspirations ... Nitro teamed briefly with Kenny Dykstra ... Moved to ECW in the 2007 draft ... Defeated Nunzio in ECW debut ... Replaced Chris Benoit at Vengeance: Night of Champions and defeated C.M. Punk for vacant ECW title ... Underwent transformation and changed name to John Morrison ... Lost title to Punk after a long feud that also included The Miz ... Suspended for 30 days for violating Wellness Policy ... Teamed with The Miz to win WWE tag team title from Matt Hardy and MVP ... Duo put differences aside and became a strong team ... Began hosting "The Dirt Sheet" on wwe.com ... Lost belts in four-way match to Curt Hawkins and Zack Ryder ... Feuded with Cryme Tyme, who hosted the "What's Up" show ... Won World tag team title from C.M. Punk and Kofi Kingston ... Lost title to Carlito and Primo Colon at WrestleMania XXV, as World and WWE tag championships became the Unified tag team championship ... Upon being drafted to *Raw*, Miz turned on his partner ... Morrison was drafted to Smackdown ... Defeated R-Truth in his return to the blue brand ... Engaged in backstage fight with Chris Jericho and became a fan favorite ... Granted first World title match against Jeff Hardy, but came up short ... Defeated Rey Mysterio Jr. to win his third I-C title, and has dominated the division since.

JOHN MORRISON

351



By Mike Lano

BUTCHER VACHON

MAURICE VACHON WAS very proud when his brother, Paul, followed his path and became an amateur wrestling star. At first.

After a while, though, the "Mad Dog," eight years his brother's senior, had seen enough.

"That's enough," Mad Dog barked at him one day, "You're turning pro! There's no money in the amateurs!"

Wrestling's first Butcher began his pro career in Detroit, where he was not known as a Canadian madman, but as Soviet heel Nicolai Zolotoff. Training under NWA promoter/booker Bert Ruby, Vachon shared the ring with several future greats, including "Leaping" Larry Chene.

"Ruby really had a great eye for getting amateur-quality boys and training them how to be good pro

wrestlers," Vachon recalls. "I thank him to this day." However, Vachon's working relationship with Ruby was short-lived, as Ruby sold the Detroit NWA promotion to Paul's friends, The Sheik and wife Joyce "The Princess" Farhat in the late-'60s. "Sheik was a real character as a wrestler and promoter, but Joyce ran things for the most part. Being saddled with all the fire-throwing and gore, few people recall that he could actually wrestle."

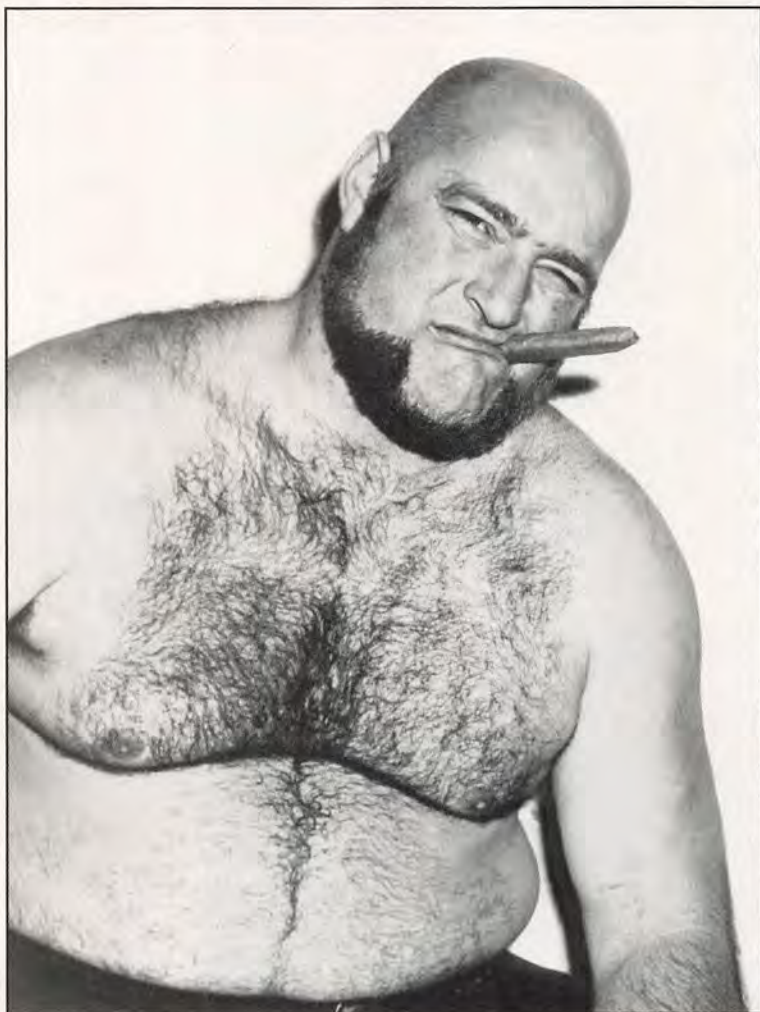
And so could Butcher. "After a few years, my 'Vachoness' was acknowledged and Maurice and I were paired with Stan Pulaski as a third Vachon 'brother' in Atlanta. We set records for years [going against] the three Torres Brothers. You couldn't do that today, but it was magic back then."

"Back then ..." Like many retired wrestlers, Vachon seems to have mixed feelings about today's business, although he hardly comes off as bitter.

"Today's wrestling has evolved greatly," he said. "When we promoted '70s Quebec (Grand Prix Promotion), you needed TV, a good reputation, and great talent. We started Andre the Giant in Montreal, plus had Mad Dog and myself, [Eduard] Carpentier, [Bruno] Sammartino, The Hollywood Blonds, the LeDucs, Killer Kowalski, Don Leo Jonathan, and so many other indelibles. It was more fun then. I wouldn't want to promote today. There's so many other entertainment choices for working people."

Indeed, Vachon has many fond memories to look back upon. He traveled the world and had the time of his life. "I worked for the top North American promoters and only a few bad ones in the '60s and '70s. The best were Vince McMahon Sr., Verne Gagne, everyone in the Atlanta office with so many great minds, like Eddie Graham. That's what we're missing in part today, genius bookers like Leo Garabaldi."

In-ring highlights for Vachon include a spate of regional tag team titles and an AWA World tag title with Mad Dog. However, one in-ring memory that serves as a special source of pride for Paul was being involved in one of wrestling's first integrated matches. "The match was in Houston, in the early-'60s, against Dory Dixon. Promoter Morris Siegel said Dory was a Spaniard, a fabulous wrestler who spoke English, Spanish, and French very well. We got





Vachon uses his considerable might to overpower Butcher Brannigan in this 1975 WWF battle of the butchers. Paul would later need to summon all his strength to overcome both colon and throat cancer.

along great, although there was lots of uncertainty before the match. But we got lots of good press afterward. That was important and special for me. Wrestling in front of over 80,000 in Pakistan and India against their top guys were highlights on a different level."

In recent years, Paul's focus has been on staying healthy by dropping weight, traveling, and family. As a colon and throat cancer survivor, he tries to spread the word about the benefits of clean living. "I do try to encourage today's young wrestlers to stay away from tobacco, alcohol, and drugs and to take care of themselves. It doesn't last forever and neither will they." Healing up after surgery to repair a broken jaw that became infected after chemotherapy occupied much of Paul's time this past year.

One aspect of wrestling Vachon seems to especially lament from his era is the lost art of ribbing your co-workers to keep a loose locker room. "I don't hear of as many of them occurring now. It's a tradition needed today."

However, Vachon does keep one tradition alive through his involvement in the Cauliflower Alley Club, "At the Cauliflower Alley's cribbage tournament each year (which he's won several times), we're seeing new, young wrestlers start playing with us. It's also a tradition and I'm very happy to see

them try to challenge the legends!"

Aside from cribbage, Vachon stays busy by writing, fishing, and hawking his magnetic health bracelets at fairs across North America. And like most former athletes, Vachon enjoys supporting his favorite professional sports teams, the Minnesota Vikings, Boston Red Sox, and of course, as a proud French Canadian, the Montreal Canadiens.

To date, he's put out three self-published autobiographical books (*When Wrestling Was Real, Parts 1-3*) about his career and travels. "So many great stories. The third volume discusses the rise and fall of our Montreal promotion. They're available on my website [Butchervachon.com] and at the many fairs Dee (his wife) and I attend around the country. And right now, I'm working on *Volume Four: Life After Pro Wrestling And The Forgotten Stories*. I hope today's kids will see it, because something else I talk about is the difficult transition once your career is over in wrestling."

What's left of his free time is spent on the road with Dee and watching his daughter Luna's son, Van, an up-and-coming chef, compete on the *Hell's Kitchen* reality TV show. "My grandson's a chip off the old culinary block. We Vachons love to cook and eat!" □

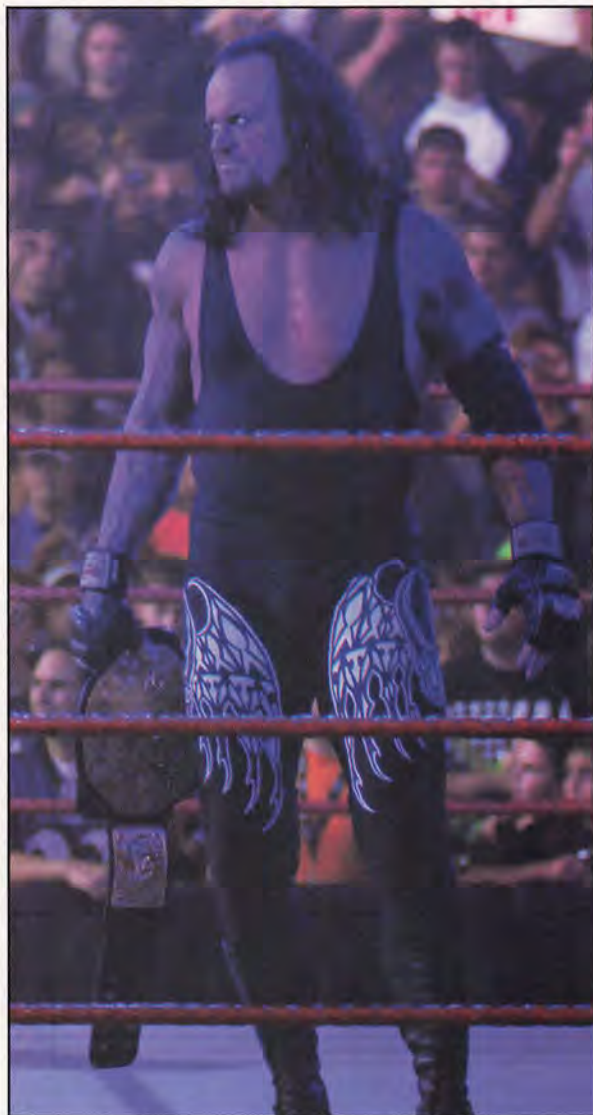


With brother Maurice "Mad Dog" and daughter Luna, Paul keeps his hand in the business through his involvement with the Cauliflower Alley Club. An avid fisherman, author, and cribbage wiz, Vachon also spends ample time on the road extolling the virtues of living tobacco-, drug-, and alcohol-free.

Photo by Mike Lano

With Matt Brock

Harder than nails, veteran wrestling reporter Matt Brock has logged more miles covering wrestling than any other journalist. Every month Matt will travel to the sport's hotbeds, reporting everything he sees without fear or favor



TOUGHER THAN YOUR AVERAGE CORPSE

NEWARK, NJ: Let's give WWE an ounce of credit for trying to make its pay-per-views special by adding themes to some of them, but the fact remains that 15 in a year's time is probably three or four too many in this or any economy. I'm not sure I'm convinced giving one a Hell in a Cell theme by naming it just that and having a few matches inside that barbaric chamber in one night is a smart idea. Then again, you probably know what I always say about how often

Vince McMahon asks for Matt Brock's opinion.

¶Can't remember the last time I saw The Undertaker open a pay-per-view, but he did it here against C.M. Punk, winning the World title in a surprisingly ordinary HITC match by his standards. Punk turned in more offense than I expected in a match that was a lot shorter than most expected, at only about 10 minutes. Dead or undead, 'Taker earned this scribe's respect a long time ago, which isn't the easiest thing to do when you rely on spooky funeral parlor music and all the other gimmickry. ¶Still, 'Taker is Texas tough, even as his body starts to betray him in a big way. Just getting down the ring steps and up the ramp after the match was a chore for him tonight, and a grueling, marathon match couldn't be blamed this time. ¶WWE has been wise to limit the man's schedule in recent years, and he still

wins a hell of a lot more than he loses, but the wins are getting uglier. Might be time to start making plans for an Undertaker farewell tour. Once the knees and hips start to go, it's hard for any wrestler to get back to anything resembling top form. ¶When he does walk away, I might even start to miss what many call the best ring entrance in the history of this sport. How much does that tell you?

NEWARK, DE: Made the yearly trip down I-95 to this college town for the 13th annual ECWA Super 8 Tournament, and the first nice thing was the weather was much clearer than last year, when, arriving late, I parked in the dark field behind the Greater Newark Boys' and Girls' Club and proceeded to step out of the car and into an ankle-high puddle with both feet. Great way to ruin a perfectly good pair of 19-year-old loafers. ¶Anyway, that was 2008. This year's event had more of a local feel than maybe any of the previous 12. Maybe it was the lousy economy we're all stuck in (save on long flights into the area) or maybe it was just promoter Jim Kettner's way of changing things up. Regardless, there always seems to be one standout star that doesn't win the tournament, and this year was no exception. ¶Nick Logan won it all right after his brothers captured the ECWA tag title, making it a pretty nice night for folks with that surname. I say keep an eye out for the guy he beat by submission in the finals if you can remember his name. I can't say he was on my radar before this night, but Tommaso Ciampa had that "it" factor, at least for a night. I'll give credit where it's due. I caught up with Dan Murphy before the show, and he told me I'd be impressed by the kid. ¶"Good athleticism and a nice connection with the crowd," Murph said, and he was right. Of course, he

reminded me when he and I joined Brandi and Dave Lenker for sandwiches and adult beverages a mile west down Route 40 at Buffalo Wild Wings in the wee hours after the card ended. ¶ Look back at your Super 8 history and note that over the last eight years, guys like Bryan Danielson, A.J. Styles, Austin Aries, and Milano Collection A.T. got noticed by not quite winning this thing. Good deal for Ciampa.

IRVINE, CA: For those who don't know the tragic tale of the Von Erich family, I don't have the space here to recount it. Not sure I could do it justice if Saks gave me every page of this magazine and let me use microscopic print. I'll keep it short and say they were a family whose heyday came about a generation ago and who got almost completely chewed up by this sport. ¶ One of the best known of the Von Erichs, Kerry, has left behind a third generation of wrestling Von Erich, as his daughter, Lacey, recently made her TNA debut. I'd been told she was beautiful but very raw in the ring, and so far I can only tell the former is true. She made her PPV debut at Bound for Glory seconding her fellow Beautiful People, Velvet Sky and Madison Rayne, as they made an unsuccessful bid to win the Knockouts tag title from Taylor Wilde and Sarita. ¶ Lacey's contribution consisted of teasing a kiss with Sky and getting touchy-feely with referees Jamie Tucker and Earl Hebner before Hebner kicked her keister to the back. Perverts in the crowd didn't like that decision. The Von Erichs were obviously a fatally flawed family with more skeletons than your local graveyard, but in the ring, they had as much substance as style. ¶ Lacey clearly has a ways to go to live up to the name—in terms of what she can show in the ring, I mean. Meanwhile, grandfather

Fritz threatens to do a few rotations six feet under.

MOUNT VERNON,

NY: I've never been much of an obituary writer, though I did a little of it for a small newspaper for about two months way back before most of you were born. I'd much rather offer my personal recollections and leave it to someone else to run down all the details, accomplishments, and what have you (see *The Wrestler* page 56). Summing up my thoughts on Capt. Lou Albano, may be the greatest manager of all-time, isn't easy. ¶ He died at age 76 at his home surrounded by family after having spent a brief period under hospice care. One great thing about Albano before he added the "Captain" to his name was that he knew his limitations. As a wrestler, his greatest accomplishment was a two-week WWF tag team title reign with his Sicilians partner, Tony Altimore, in the summer of 1967. ¶ Going on athletic skill alone, that was about 14 days more than he should have gotten. But Albano was smart and realistic, and years later, there was no manager more entertaining as he guided a total of 13 teams to 17 WWF World tag titles. And much as the purist in me hates to admit it, he ushered in the hottest era in WWF history at the time with his role in that blasted Rock 'n' Wrestling Connection in the mid-1980s. ¶ Albano had a heart of gold at a time when the nefarious types in this sport didn't want anyone to know they had any other side

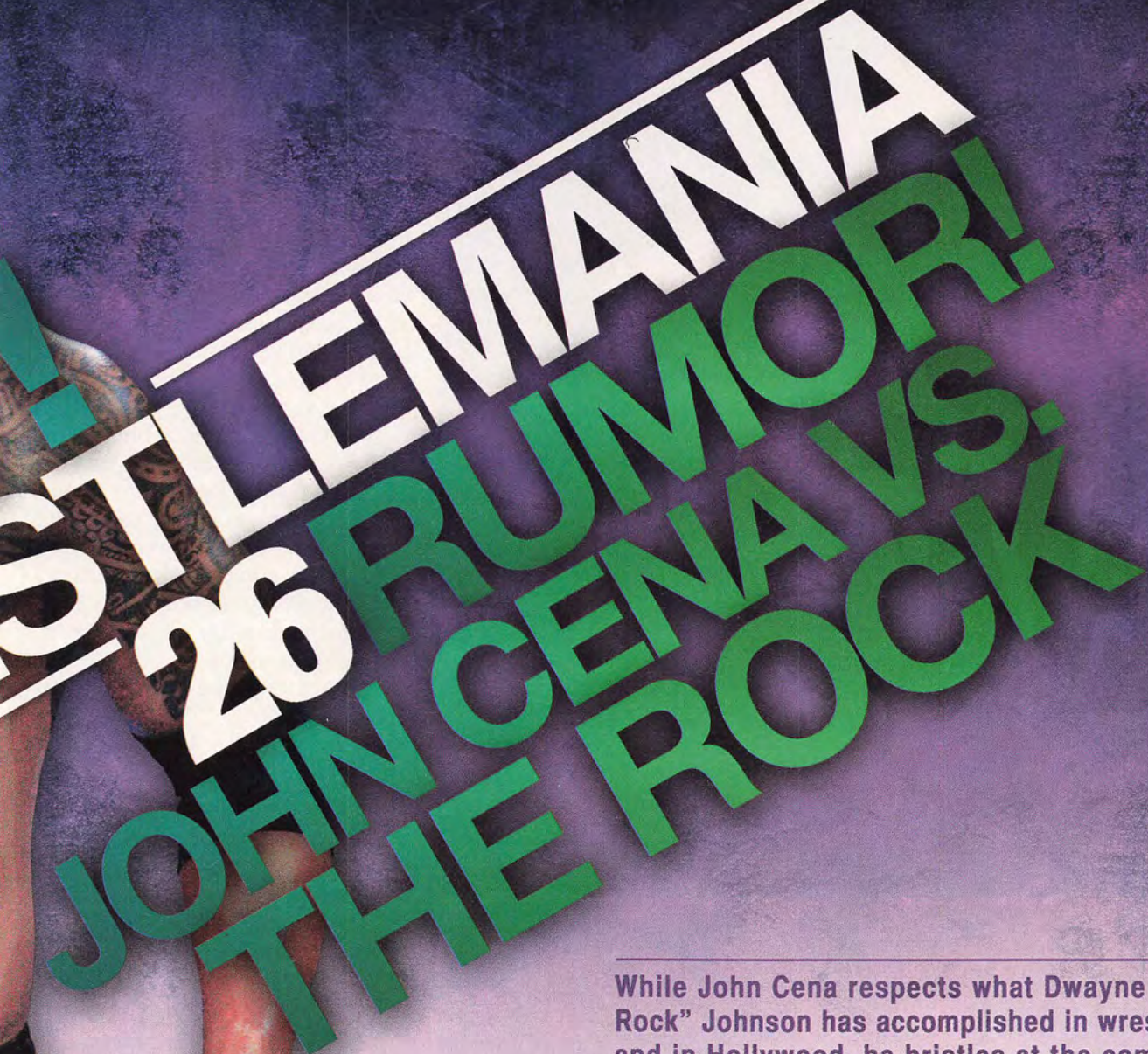


MORE BEAUTY THAN SKILL ... SO FAR

than the nefarious one they displayed when the lights were on in the arenas. Even when he'd get his bloody comeuppance from a Superfly Snuka or another hot WWF fan favorite of the day, Lou loved being the center of attention and entertaining in any way he could. ¶ Eventually, of course, he made the transformation from despised to beloved and shed about half of his old self in weight. ¶ I'll always remember him as the fat (he wouldn't want to be known by any more gentle adjective) guy with the rubber bands in his beard speaking so fast that you weren't sure he made any sense. Another huge loss from a generation that's disappearing far too quickly. □



Photo by Duane Long

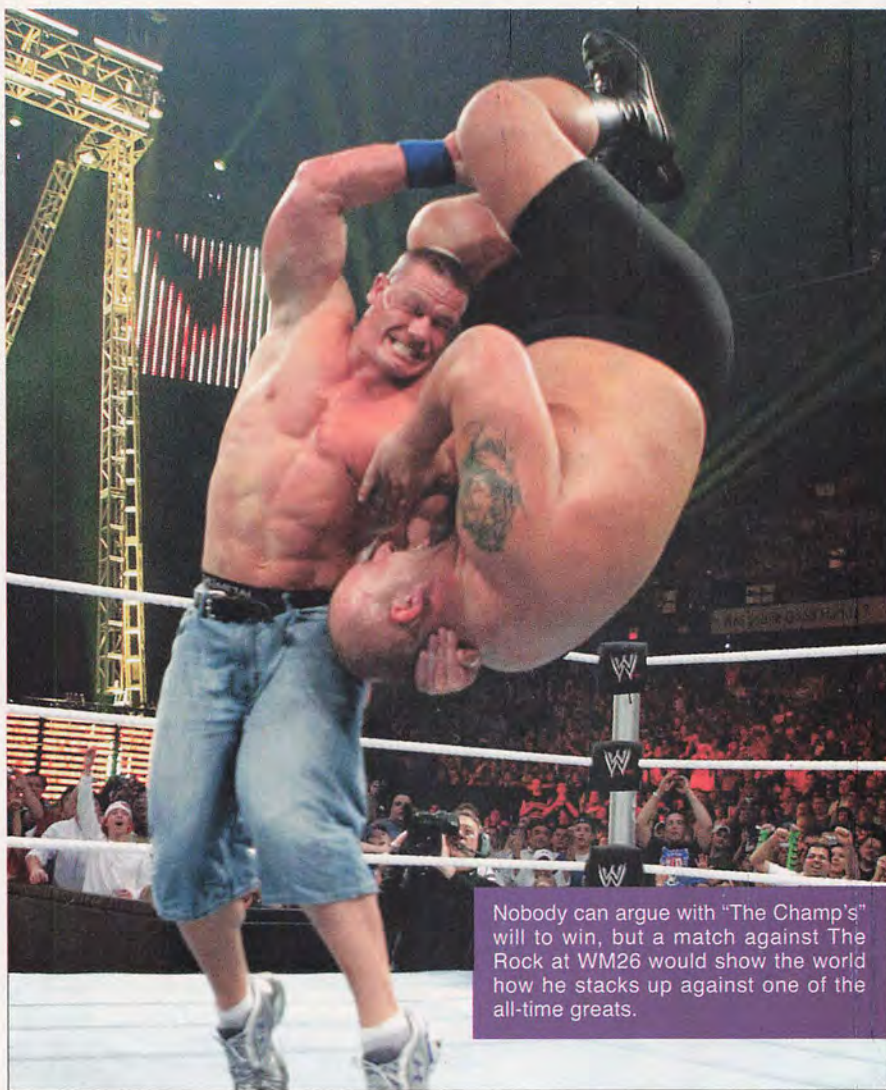


WRESTLEMANIA 26 RUMOR! JOHN CENA VS. THE ROCK

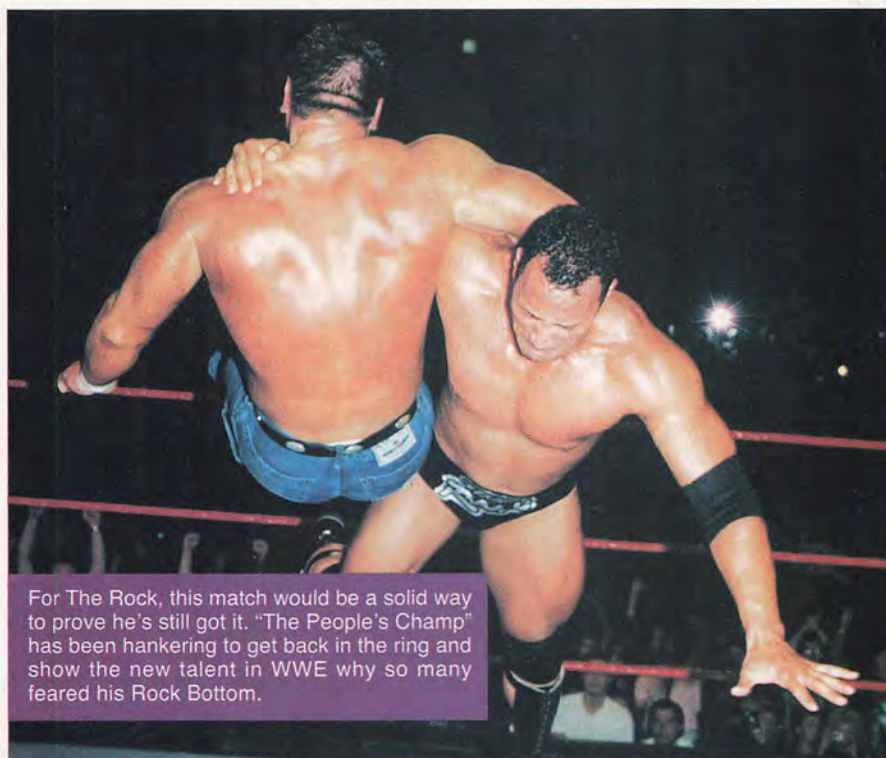
While John Cena respects what Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson has accomplished in wrestling and in Hollywood, he bristles at the comparisons between the two. With WrestleMania 26 now in view, word is Cena wants to prove—on wrestling’s biggest stage—that there really is no comparison

By Brian Solomon

THEY CALL IT “The Showcase Of The Immortals,” and for good reason. For more than a quarter-century, WrestleMania has been the place where legends have come together and the fans have seen the matches of their dreams. There is one match that wrestling fans haven’t wasted their emotions dreaming about. It was more than unlikely; it was impossible.



Nobody can argue with "The Champ's" will to win, but a match against The Rock at WM26 would show the world how he stacks up against one of the all-time greats.



For The Rock, this match would be a solid way to prove he's still got it. "The People's Champ" has been hankering to get back in the ring and show the new talent in WWE why so many feared his Rock Bottom.

John Cena vs. The Rock. "The Showbiz Showdown." Can't happen.

But can it? If you're like most of us and will listen to rumors if they have a credible basis, you're as excited about this one as we are.

One man is wrestling's biggest mainstream breakout celebrity since Hulk Hogan—some might say even more so than Hogan. And the other has been, arguably, WWE's hottest wrestler over the past seven years. They have never met in the ring before, and the ramifications of this titanic encounter have insiders drooling already.

"I'm trying not to blow this out of proportion, but you can trust me when I say that I've heard things that indicate some very real talks are in progress," a anonymous insider source told INSIDE WRESTLING on the condition of anonymity. "Both men are apparently eager to do it, it's just a question of working out the details, crossing all the T's and dotting all the I's."

Assuming these T's are crossed and those I's dotted, we could be looking at John Cena vs. The Rock in a match to determine the single brightest WWE star of the past decade.

Cena has made no bones about the fact that even though he greatly admires The Rock, he also regards his mainstream success as something of a betrayal of WWE's fans and wrestlers. Much like The Rock looked up to Hogan in his formative years in the business, Cena looked up to The Rock. For a superstar that has accomplished so much since first arriving in WWE in 2002, such a match would represent something of a dream come true.

"John was the one who put things into motion with that public challenge he issued a few months back," said a source close to Cena. "Working with The Rock at the biggest show of the year is something that means quite a bit to him. He's always wondered who would win in a match like that."

As for the self-proclaimed "Most Electrifying Man In Sports

Entertainment,” The Rock has been only marginally involved in sports entertainment in recent times. Since crossing over so successfully into Hollywood, “The Brahma Bull” has distanced himself from the sport that made him a star, even going so far as to drop the “Rock” moniker in favor of his real name. But does that mean the fire is gone?

“Make no mistake, Dwayne is still very capable of getting the job done in the ring, and has never stopped talking about a comeback match since he walked away,” said a long-time friend. “It’s a passion that’s never died. He’s had people in his ear telling him to stay away, but I don’t think he can ignore the call of the ring forever.”

For a long time now, we’ve heard how The Rock has been advised that stepping into the ring would be a bad move for his movie career. He was quoted some years ago as saying that he would never be completely done with the business, but fans (as well as Cena) have had their doubts. Rock’s infrequent WWE appearances do indeed suggest that he’s closed that chapter of his life for good.

Nevertheless, a match against Cena could very well be just the thing to quench that desire to compete once more. Although some might dispute it, Cena has become the single hottest WWE competitor since The Rock himself stepped away from full-time competition some six years ago. A match against Cena, and—dare we even speculate—a victory over Cena, would truly be something special in the career of a man who has literally done it all in the sport of kings.

For “The Champ,” a victory over The Rock could very well propel him to the greatest heights he has ever known in his career, and could finally silence the naysayers who have long argued that Cena has been handed too much and does not deserve to be where he is.

In other words, it’s easy to understand why these two men would want very much to step into the ring against each other. And it’s easy to



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One can't help but notice the parallels between Cena's and The Rock's careers. Both became mainstream attractions while maintaining solid wrestling careers. The Rock gained crossover cache by starring in his feature film *The Scorpion King* (above) while Cena starred in *The Marine* and made his rounds on shows like *The Late Show With Jimmy Fallon* (below).



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see why Vince McMahon and WWE would be in favor of such a match taking place, since it could very well represent the biggest pay-per-view payday in many years.

The match itself has "classic" written all over it. We're talking about two competitors with very similar approaches. Both wrestle a "main event" style—heavy on flamboyant offense. Both seem to draw precious energy from the crowd, and have demonstrated extremely

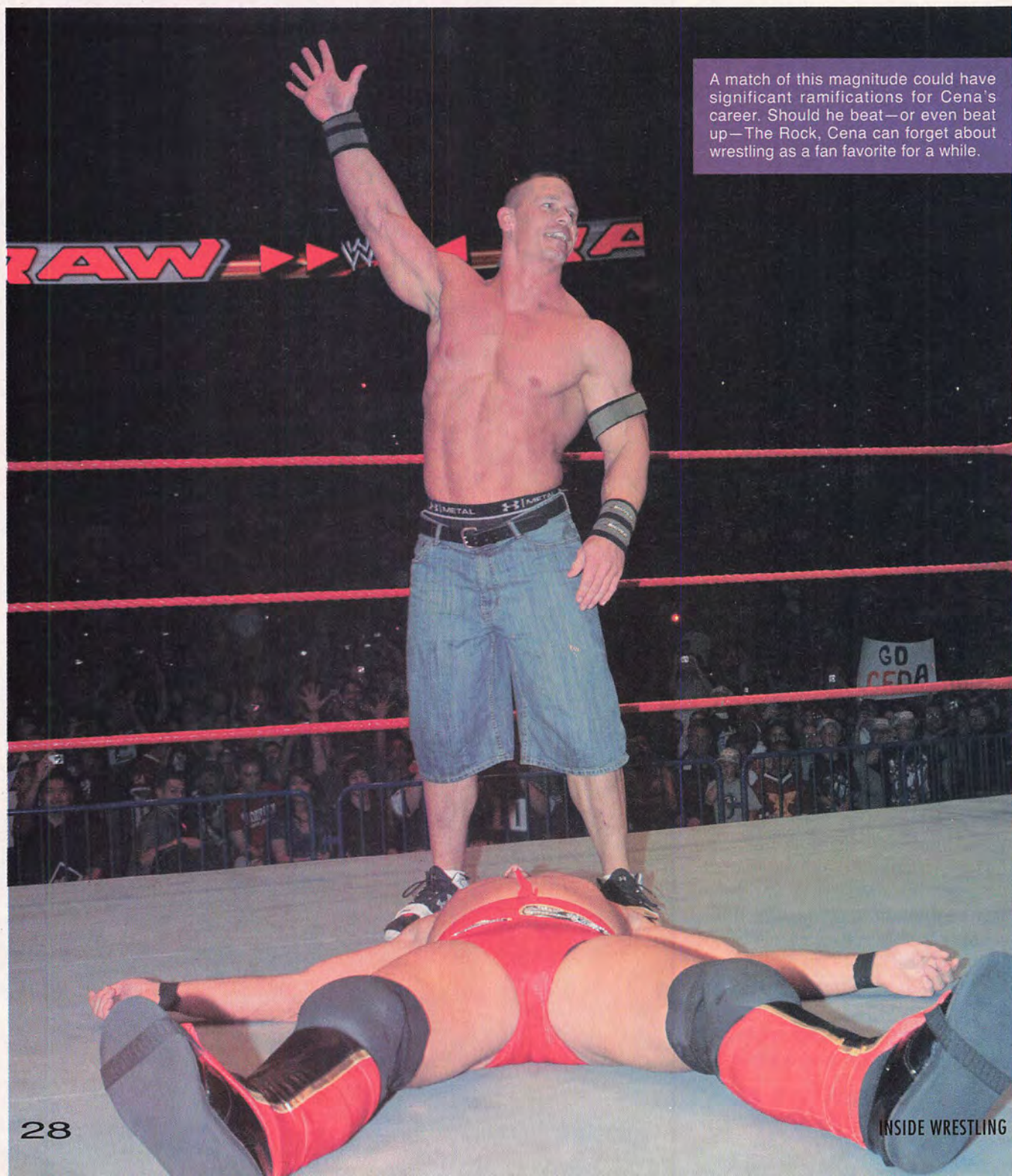
impressive conditioning. It may not be a textbook display of scientific grappling by any means, but there would certainly be no shortage of intensity.

So the question is, what stands in the way of such a thing happening? For one, those aforementioned voices whispering in The Rock's ear. Some have said that marketing people basically run the entertainment industry these days, and they have proven to be a powerful influ-

ence thus far, keeping The Rock away from the ring for the better part of the past decade.

But there are other issues at work here, as well. Although he is surely excited about the prospect of getting The Rock back in his ring, might Vince harbor some bitterness about how he stepped away from a business he swore he never would abandon? Might WWE execs be worried that a loss to The Rock could hurt the public's perception of

A match of this magnitude could have significant ramifications for Cena's career. Should he beat—or even beat up—The Rock, Cena can forget about wrestling as a fan favorite for a while.



their golden boy, Cena?

"There's no doubt that it's a concern," confirmed our source. "WWE has worked very hard to help Cena overcome that fan backlash. Trading blows with the immensely popular Rock could undo all that work. I mean, let's face it, if it happened, it would be a one-shot deal, and The Rock would go back to Hollywood. Cena would be the one who would have to face the fans the next day on *Raw*. It's just as likely he'd get a

negative reception as a positive reception. It's risky for The Rock but even riskier for Cena"

Nevertheless, right now there are significant signs that point to this match becoming a reality next spring in Phoenix. "If I had to commit, I would say it's going to happen," our source continued. "The upside far outweighs any negatives, especially from WWE's point of view. And I also think Dwayne has finally realized that a high-

profile comeback like this might actually help his acting career, not hinder it."

Hogan vs. Andre. Bigelow vs. L.T. Michaels vs. Hart. Austin vs. Rock. Undertaker vs. Michaels. These have all been epic encounters that helped enshrine WrestleMania as the "Crown Jewel Of Pay-Per-View." And now, it looks like "Cena vs. Rock" may soon to be added to that remarkable list of unforgettable struggles. □

Part of the draw for a Rock-Cena showdown would be their verbal exchanges during the build-up to WM26. Cena, who is said to be pushing hard for the match, would be particularly inspired to trade barbs with The Rock.



INSIDE Wrestling

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WHAT'S AHEAD FOR WRESTLING'S TOP STARS IN 2010?

A MAJOR PART of the appeal of pro wrestling lies in its instability. On any given night, a championship can change hands, an explosive new feud could ignite, or an injury can shake things up and make opportunities for new stars to be born.

In 1984, Hulk Hogan capitalized on an injury to Bob Backlund and humbled The Iron Sheik to launch Hulkamania. In 1996, Steve Austin flippantly defined "Austin 3:16," and ushered in the era of "The Texas Rattlesnake." Who could have predicted "The Ringmaster" would become arguably the most profitable star in wrestling history?

There's a certain amount of unpredictability inherent in wrestling, and that's why millions of fans continue to tune in, week after week. But for every Hogan or Austin who becomes a so-called "overnight sensation," there are dozens of wrestlers like Triple-H, The Undertaker, Kurt Angle, and others whose climb to the top of the sport

was meticulously plotted and executed. For the majority of wrestlers who don't have the luxury of walking into a star-making situation, it is imperative for them to continuously take stock of their careers. After all, you can't get to where you want to go if you don't know where you are, right?

In this exclusive section, our editorial staff takes a hard look at 24 of wrestling's top names. We examine what they have achieved in 2009 and try to predict what lies ahead for them in the coming year. In some cases, we make some predictions (such as Chris Jericho giving up his world title aspirations to go for the U.S. championship). In other cases, we offer advice or warn of upcoming challenges and obstacles.

Of course, this isn't an exact science. WWE wrestlers can be traded from brand to brand, sometimes at the whim of whatever guest host shows up on *Raw*. Injuries are an unfortunate reality, and the

most dominating champion can be sidelined with a torn muscle or broken bone.

While we don't claim to have any crystal balls at our disposal here in our Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, office, we can at least make educated guesses at future achievement based on past performance, direction, promotional climate, and other factors. For example, we forecast that Melina will be the face of the Divas division of *Raw* throughout 2010 because she has the total package of wrestling skill, charisma, and marketability, and because her two toughest challengers (Mickie James and Beth Phoenix) have been traded to *Smackdown*. But another trade or an injury could change that completely ... which, once again, is why we continue to watch.

We hope you enjoy this peek into 2010, and we hope the wrestlers we feature heed our advice. The way we see it, 2010 is going to be an extremely exciting year.

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Chris Jericho In 2010?

When Chris Jericho has his eyes set on championship gold, he never gives up until he acquires it. In 2009, he won the Intercontinental championship, as well as the Unified tag team championship. When 2010 comes along, he will be looking to add a bit more gold to his already long list of accomplishments.

It would be too easy to say that he will be gunning for the WWE heavyweight or World championship. Jericho is always full of surprises. Always preoccupied with feeding his ego, Jericho would love to be able to say he has won *every* title in WWE, so he's also likely to target the one WWE title that has eluded him thus far—the U.S. championship. Currently, Jericho and his partner Big Show are the dominant tag team in WWE and that should carry over into 2010. They have plowed through the competition, obliterating Cryme Tyme as well as MVP and Mark Henry and Ted Bibiase Jr. and Cody Rhodes.

Yet we shouldn't expect 2010 to be all golden for Jericho. At some point he will have to contend with his former partner Edge, who was sidelined for a number of months with a torn Achilles tendon. Jericho didn't endear himself to Edge by calling him "the weak link of their team" when the former world champion was went out. When Edge returns, he might even be the one who causes the team of "Jerishow" to implode. Or it could be D-X that knocks them off their perch. That is, of course, if the team doesn't self-destruct from Jericho's humongous ego first.

2009 HIGHPOINT: Beat Rey Mysterio Jr. at Extreme Rules to become the record-setting nine-time Intercontinental champion.

2009 LOWPOINT: Challenged Mickey Rourke to a fight and got punched out by the actor at WrestleMania 25.



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Jericho should continue to hone his skills against the likes of MVP, because he will be in for an epic battle with Edge when the "Rated R Superstar" is healthy enough to return.

What's Ahead For Triple-H In 2010?

Triple-H spent most of 2009 feuding with Randy Orton and his lackeys, Cody Rhodes and Ted DiBiase Jr. When the nepotistic nasty boys took out Hunter's former Evolution stablemate, Batista, as well as Vince, Shane, and Stephanie McMahon, Hunter decided it was time to put DeGeneration-X back together. After stumbling through some Bugs and Daffy-esque vignettes (where Shawn Michaels had apparently quit the business to flip burgers in a cafeteria), DeGeneration-X was back.

They made their return at SummerSlam in grand fashion. Uniformed soldiers marched down the ramp with a Humvee, followed

by DeGeneration-X in a military tank. Legacy definitely gave them a battle, going hold for hold early on, until Michaels finally hit some Sweet Chin Music and pinned Rhodes. The crowd went home happy, but DeGeneration-X went home with a few more bumps and bruises than they expected.


The time for clowning around was over when they suffered a loss to Legacy at Breaking Point. After a backstage brawl, they ended up back in the ring, with Legacy double-teaming Michaels. Rhodes applied a figure-four on the post as DiBiase Jr. applied the Million-Dollar Dream for a double submission, and Michaels tapped out.

The nagging ugliness of Orton

and Legacy doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon. The feud has developed beyond just a grudge between Triple-H and Orton. Expect both sides to expand their ranks in 2010. Orton will bring Jack Swagger into Legacy. Triple-H will steal Dolph Ziggler from Smackdown and promote The Miz to form a new incarnation of Evolution, evening up the odds and possibly creating a few new stars along the way.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Retained the WWE title against Randy Orton at WrestleMania.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Alongside Batista and Shane McMahon lost to Orton, Rhodes, and DiBiase Jr. in a six-man grudge match at Backlash.



"The Game" had a monster year in 2009. Now that he is teamed up with Shawn Michaels once again, 2010 promises to be just as big.

Photo by Steve Beyer

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For John Cena In 2010?

Throughout 2009, John Cena's major foes have been Edge, The Big Show, and Randy Orton. In the early part of the year, Cena lost to Edge in an Elimination Chamber and a Last Man Standing match. He made Big Show tap with the STF, and beat Edge and Big Show at WrestleMania for the WWE title. As the year progressed, Cena rekindled his feud with Orton, but lost to him in three out of four pay-per-view main events. Cena is frustrated facing the same opponents over and over, and fed up with the way the crowd reacts to him. His rap has become stale. He's like Hulk Hogan circa 1994. Cena works hard and there are only two things he really wants: respect and The Rock.

Their careers have mirrored each other. Each has led WWE as a world champion, succeeded in Hollywood, and been booed by the fans while trying to project a clean-cut, babyface persona. The Rock had the chance to answer those rabid fans by turning heel and telling them what he really thought of them. That's when he achieved superstardom. Cena may be destined to reach that level, but the only way he will achieve it is by following in The Rock's footsteps.

In 2010, The Rock will be a guest host on *Raw*. Cena and Rock will team up; then Cena will turn on him. As they build to a match at WrestleMania 26, a new John Cena will emerge. He'll shed the sweatbands and chain gang T-shirts, and come to the ring slow and cocky, dressed to the nines in Armani suits. For the fans that have wanted to boo him all these years, the result will be cathartic, leading to a new level of success for John Cena.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Defeated Edge and Big Show at WrestleMania 25 to win his second WWE title.

2009 LOWPOINT: Lost his WWE title, his third loss in four pay-per-view main events against Randy Orton, at Hell in a Cell.



Look for a big time match between "The People's Champ" and "The Champ" in 2010.

What's Ahead For Randy Orton In 2010?

Randy Orton compiled an impressive string of victories in 2009. His slither-and-strike offense has proven to be very effective, and his finishing move, the RKO into the dreaded head punt, has taken many opponents out of action, including Shane and Vince McMahon and Triple-H. Orton also had the dubious distinction of laying a DDT on the "Billion-Dollar Princess," Stephanie McMahon, and sealing it with a kiss, right in front of Stephanie's husband, Triple-H.

He also captured his fourth WWE heavyweight title when he defeated John Cena at Hell in a Cell in early-October.

Aside from being a mainstay in the WWE title picture, Orton's other role has been as leader of Legacy with Ted DiBiase Jr. and Cody Rhodes. Orton has brought DiBiase and Rhodes to a new level. He has made them stars while using them as his henchman to help protect him and his title.

Expect Orton to add to the ranks of Legacy, transforming the group into a cross between The Four Horsemen and The Manson Family under his cult-like leadership. Jack Swagger has shown interest, and could take DiBiase's place, but as tempting as his inclusion would be for Orton, it would be

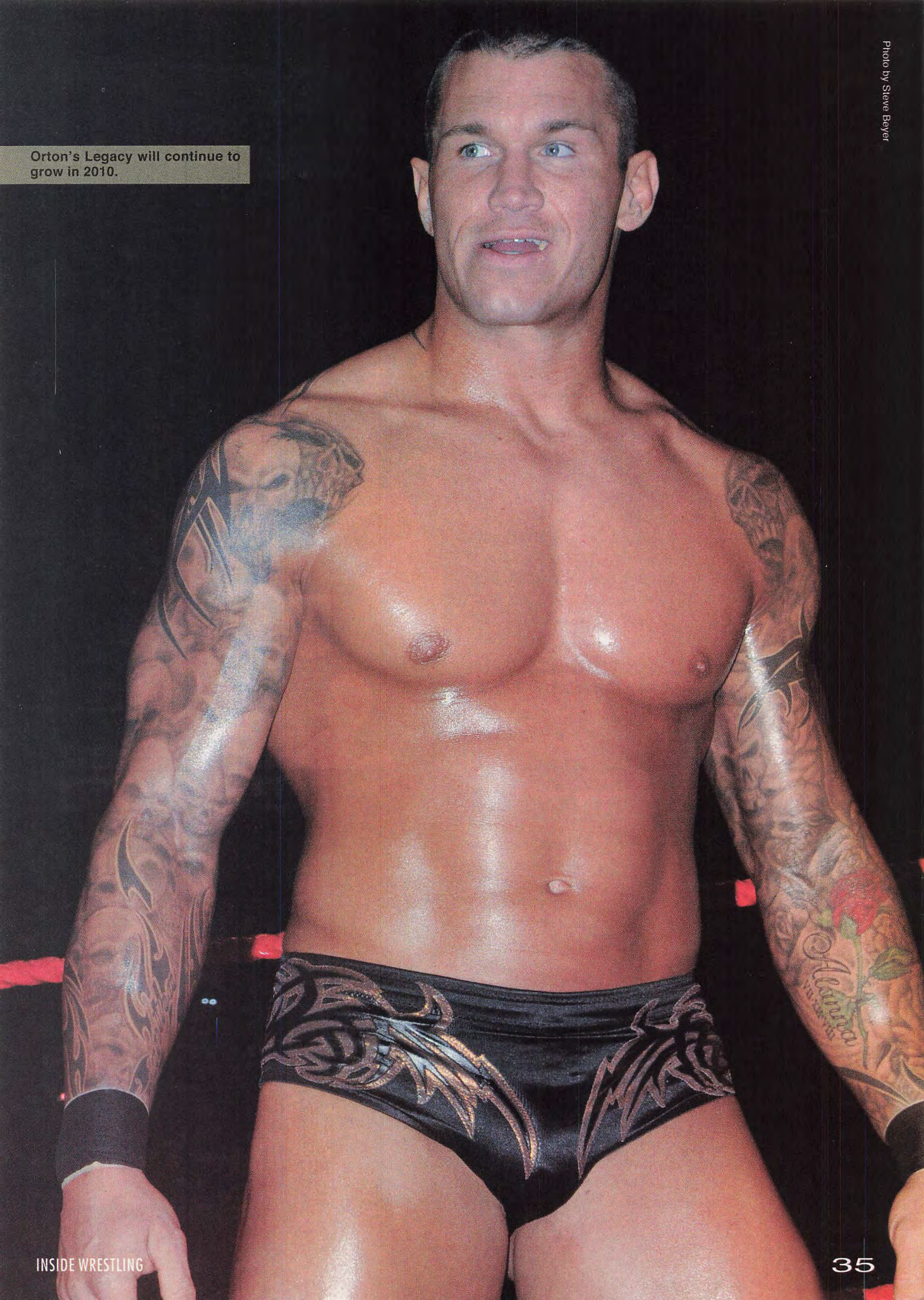
a mistake. With Swagger's massive ego and competitive drive, it would be difficult for him to willingly subordinate his own ambitions to Orton's or anybody else's.

Given the level of success he achieved in 2009, there's no reason to expect that Orton will deviate from the path he's traveling now—unless something happens to knock him off-course in 2010.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Won the WWE heavyweight title from John Cena at Hell in a Cell.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Lost the WWE heavyweight title to Batista in a steel cage match at Extreme Rules.

Orton's Legacy will continue to grow in 2010.



WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For The Undertaker In 2010?

The Undertaker did not have the best year in 2009. He was eliminated from the Royal Rumble by The Big Show and lost in the Elimination Chamber match at No Way Out. But then he redeemed himself by beating Shawn Michaels in a classic match at WrestleMania 25. The fact that The Undertaker can still perform the way he did at 'Mania is a testament to his determination and professionalism. Unfortunately, he can't chokeslam Father Time, and it's getting to the point where he may have just one big match per year left in him.

After 'Mania, he was sidelined with injuries and missed the next six pay-per-views. He returned at SummerSlam to attack C.M. Punk after Punk's title win over Jeff Hardy, only to lose a submission match to Punk at Breaking Point in a controversial finish orchestrated by Punk, Teddy Long, referee Scott Armstrong (and possibly Vince McMahon). Finally, after injuries and a string of bad luck, he decisively beat C.M. Punk for the World title at Hell in a Cell.

Undertaker's next big program will be with Batista. Expect Batista to turn heel on Rey Mysterio Jr. and then feud with Undertaker through WrestleMania. Both men have a lot of mileage on their bodies, so don't expect classic scientific matches between them. Undertaker has always done well against big monster type heels, and Batista is a natural fit for him.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Won the WWE World title from C.M. Punk at Hell in a Cell.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Lost a submission match to C.M. Punk under questionable circumstances at Breaking Point.

'Taker only has a few more years left in him. But what a year 2010 will be!



What's Ahead For C.M. Punk In 2010?

At Judgment Day, he was the hometown hero facing the monster Umaga. Five months later at Hell in a Cell, he was a hated rulebreaker battling the beloved Undertaker. When he's a babyface, the fans live and die with Punk. When he's a heel, they hate him to his core. Given the opportunity, Punk not only rises to the occasion, but shines like a star. He's got the look. He can talk, and most importantly, he can get it done in the ring. Punk possesses that intangible "it" factor that makes great wrestlers legends. His biggest problem is that he knows it, and this rubs people the wrong way. Punk doesn't care what the fans think of him and, reportedly, he

sometimes displays a similar attitude toward his peers. He doesn't play politics. He just competes and usually wins. If he can avoid talking himself into trouble, he could be a huge star.

In 2010, Punk will get the great feud that he needs to propel him to the next level. Punk will clash with Rey Mysterio Jr. and blow the roof off of every arena they wrestle in. His feud with Jeff Hardy was cut short just when it was picking up steam, so a feud with Mysterio could be what finally puts Punk over the top. Punk is best when in battle, verbally and physically. He could generate good heat with Mysterio by playing off of Mysterio's immense

popularity. Punk will preach that he is the only true hero worthy of worship and that Mysterio's fans should idolize him because he is the only straight edge wrestler in WWE. This will keep Punk on the radar until The Undertaker or Batista gets hurt again. Just like The Rock and Steve Austin, the fans will make C.M. Punk a star whether the front office likes it or not.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Cashed in his second money in the bank contract to beat Jeff Hardy for the World title at Extreme Rules.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Was buried at Hell in a Cell by The Undertaker and lost the World title.

Look for Punk to step up to the next level in 2010.



WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Kurt Angle In 2010?

It was looking like yet another new beginning for Angle this fall. No more Main Event Mafia, and respect rather than disdain for the hungry young wrestlers in TNA. If Angle intends to go back to his roots as just a flat-out phenomenal wrestler, that's a good thing. A new and fresh feud with the debuting Desmond Wolfe (Nigel McGuinness) looks fantastic and should spill into 2010. We hope TNA resists the urge to make things too complicated with Angle, as has happened far too often, and eventually reveal that he has been in cahoots with Wolfe all along and is still very much a heel.

All the twists and turns with him leading and then not leading and then leading the Main Event Mafia again were a bit much. However, we will give the creative team the benefit of the doubt this time and tell you we expect a very good and consistent year all around for Angle in 2010. The feud with Wolfe will end up being more or less a stalemate, but it will be Angle's next major feud that will intrigue fans even more. He'll battle fellow former amateur standout and MMA hopeful Bobby Lashley in a series that will stir memories of some of the majestic matches Angle had with Brock Lesnar in WWE early in the new millennium.

Somewhat surprisingly to some, Angle will not be all that involved in the chase for the TNA World title in 2010. At this stage in his career, that's probably best. Much like Shawn Michaels in WWE, he doesn't need a championship to be one of the biggest stars on any card.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Got help from Samoa Joe in reclaiming the TNA World title in a King of the Mountain match at Slammiversary.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Lost the TNA World title to A.J. Styles in a five-way match at No Surrender that also included Sting, Hernandez, and Matt Morgan.



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

World title gold isn't necessary for Angle to still have a stellar 2010.

What's Ahead For A.J. Styles In 2010?

You can't help but wonder if Styles thought it would take four-plus years for him to climb back to the top of TNA ... or whether he thought he would ever actually be there again. His three reigns as NWA champion (back when TNA more or less controlled the NWA title) were short and forgettable, seemingly an indication that management viewed him as the man who could consistently deliver the best match on the card but who didn't have the total package needed to be standard-bearer for a national promotion.

It appears TNA fans are willing to accept Styles as the man. But is TNA committed to that idea? We're not expecting Styles to be holding


the gold deep into 2010. In fact, we aren't seeing any additional TNA World title reigns in 2010. What we're encouraged by is that TNA seems to be getting back to basics with Styles. Remember his run as a heel? We'd like to forget. Remember the bizarre feud with Kurt Angle in which Karen Angle got involved? Awful. And what was Styles doing with the Legends title? He may be a legend in the making, but let guys such as Kevin Nash stake claim to that as his career winds down.

Just let Styles display his unique charisma and give him opponents with whom he can deliver stellar matches. It's nice for him to get in the mix with someone like Sting—which did produce an emotional

moment at Bound For Glory—but we think TNA will do the right thing in 2010 and let him lead the charge to reinvigorate the X division. Expect him to enjoy a long X title reign in 2010 as he attempts to make that division mean what it did a few years ago, before it got way off track at times. And don't complain about it. That would be a very good thing for TNA.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Captured his first TNA World title by defeating champion Kurt Angle, Sting, and Matt Morgan in a four-way match at No Surrender on September 20.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Was upset by Kevin Nash for the TNA Legends title at Victory Road.



Styles will have another belt around his waist in 2010, this time with a big, old X on it.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Samoa Joe In 2010?

Sometimes a creative team can really overthink things. Think back to the heyday of Goldberg in WCW. He was the hottest thing this side of "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin. Undefeated streak. World title win over Hulk Hogan in front of 40,000 fans at the Georgia Dome. The streak had to end sometime, but Goldberg didn't have to lose as much momentum as he did. From there, things got progressively worse. He never regained much of his lost momentum after that, not even in WWE years later.

TNA seemingly had something Goldberg-like when it signed Samoa Joe. It was just a question of when, not if, he would lead the promotion as World champion. Somewhere along the line it got screwed up. Even his eight-month reign as TNA World champ in 2008 felt flat. Since then, it's gotten worse. Politics have gotten in the way. Joe has grown frustrated. He created his Nation of Violence, formed a brief alliance with Taz, then surprisingly joined the Main Event Mafia, and turned heel. Got all that? Call it Overbooking 101.

A feud with Bobby Lashley is certainly a welcome change. They had a terrific match at Bound for Glory and could get mileage out of that into 2010. Most of the previous few years have felt like "pivotal" years for Joe, but 2010 is a huge one. It may be TNA's last chance to cement him as an elite star. We see a major (and extended feud) with Matt Morgan for Joe in 2010. Unfortunately, we see TNA ultimately having more faith in Morgan, which will be quite evident when it's over.

2009 Highlight: Defeated Sting in a grudge match at Victory Road with help from his previously secret adviser, Taz.

2009 Lowlight: Lost the X division title he had won from Homicide at Hard Justice to Amazing Red after new arch-rival Bobby Lashley interfered.



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Will need to regain momentum if he wants to become one of the all-time greats.

What's Ahead For Sting In 2010?

Will he or won't he? Brett Favre—er, Sting—reached his most recent career crossroads at Bound for Glory in October after he was defeated by TNA World champion A.J. Styles. He made a passionate post-match speech saying he didn't know if he would be continuing his career or not, but the fans were telling him they wanted more and he was leaning that way.

Unlike Favre and the drama he creates (some would say manufactures) annually in the NFL, Sting seems genuinely torn and maybe even a little remorseful about the uncertainty that results. Well, in 2010, he finally will—retire, that is—only to find it too difficult to resist an offer to work for Vince McMahon

just once. Nah, we honestly don't see that happening—not even the offer from Vince part. Not at age 50, when it's clear that Sting has lost a step, if not two, in the ring. But we don't think his match with Styles—whom he helped win the TNA World title—was his last big one.

Sting doesn't need to challenge for the TNA World title anymore and doesn't need to take a shot at another run as a heel (despite his best efforts, that didn't work so well last year, as fans revere him too much). In fact, he has *nothing* more to accomplish in TNA. We think he'll take another hiatus and then ultimately go out with the man who brought him into TNA in the first place: Jeff Jarrett.

Sting debuted in TNA as Jarrett's partner back in 2003, then returned later to challenge him. Give it a few months of buildup, starting by next summer and let it climax in an emotional showdown, perhaps even in a loser-leaves-TNA-forever bout, at Bound for Glory. Jarrett will win, but they'll embrace afterward and Sting will have gotten a proper sendoff.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Re-established himself as one of TNA's top fan favorites shortly after being booted out of the nefarious Main Event Mafia by attacking the group and stealing Kurt Angle's TNA World title belt shortly after Slammiversary.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Lost the TNA World title to Mick Foley inside the Six Sides of Steel at Lockdown in April.

Start preparing now for Sting's big farewell in 2010.

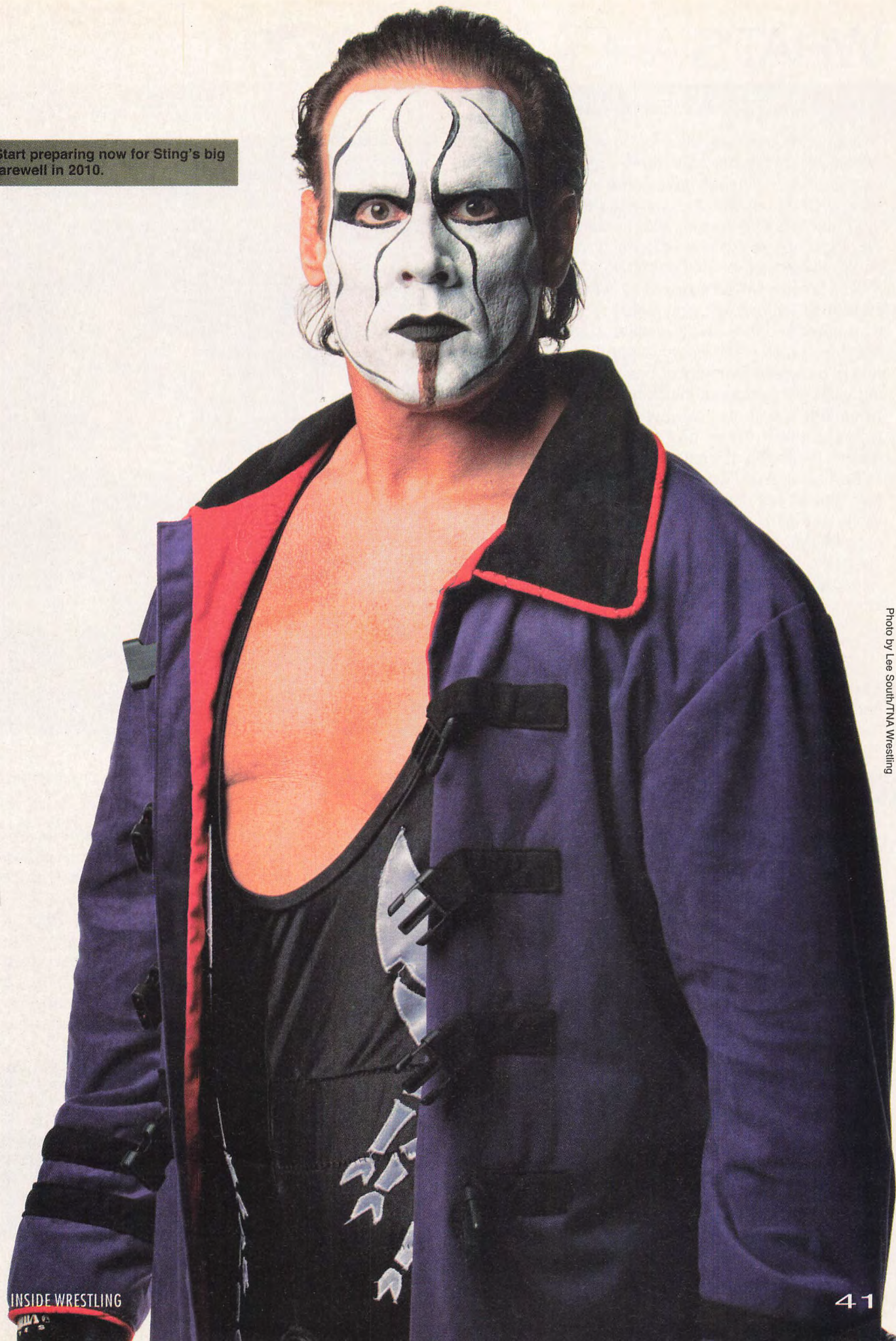


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Edge In 2010?

Injury has been the bane of Edge's career, and the Achilles tear he suffered in June was one of the most severe of all. It couldn't have come at a worse time, as he and Chris Jericho had captured the WWE Unified tag team title only a week earlier. Jericho then chose The Big Show to replace Edge, and has blasted Edge as the "weak link" of their short-lived reign since.

It is uncertain as to exactly when Edge will be cleared to return to the ring in 2010, but a built-in feud with Jericho undoubtedly awaits. Given the circumstances, it looks as if Edge will be thrust back into the role of babyface, something one of WWE's longstanding villains might have difficulty adjusting to. But, the "Ultimate Opportunist" always manages to find a way to make the most of any situation, and invariably returns to the top of whatever brand he competes on.

Earlier in 2009, Edge began to hear the cheers of the fans as his marriage with then-Smackdown GM Vicki Guerrero slowly unraveled. While it could be argued that this was more a product of the hatred Guerrero had inspired, it should also be noted that Edge has evolved into one of the WWE's more endearing characters, heel or not. Edge's plan for revenge on Jericho will depend largely on whether or not Jericho and The Big Show still hold the Unified straps when he returns. If so, look for Edge to finally reunite with Christian to go after the gold. If not, Edge will not only get payback on Jericho, but will find a way to re-establish himself as a top title contender in the process.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Captured WWE Unified tag team title with Chris Jericho, defeating the defending champions, the Colons, and Legacy in a three-way match.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Suffered torn Achilles tendon in match against Jeff Hardy on June 3 in San Diego, and remains out of action after having surgery.



The "Ultimate Opportunist" will start hearing more cheers and far fewer boos.

What's Ahead For Legacy In 2010?

Among the biggest surprises in WWE in 2009 was the fact that Legacy went the entire calendar year without capturing any gold. When the Colons defeated Miz and John Morrison at WrestleMania 25 to win the Unified tag team title, many felt that it was just a matter of time before Rhodes and DiBiase would resume control of the division. That didn't happen.

The duo failed in its one high-profile attempt to take the title from Chris Jericho and The Big Show. But there is also little question that Randy Orton's affairs and their own personal feud with D-X sidetracked Legacy. The latter did Rhodes and DiBiase wonders, even though Shawn Michaels and Triple-H ultimately

came out on top. As the year progressed, signs of frustration in both Rhodes' and DiBiase's demeanors became apparent. It seems inevitable that both will break away from Orton in 2010.

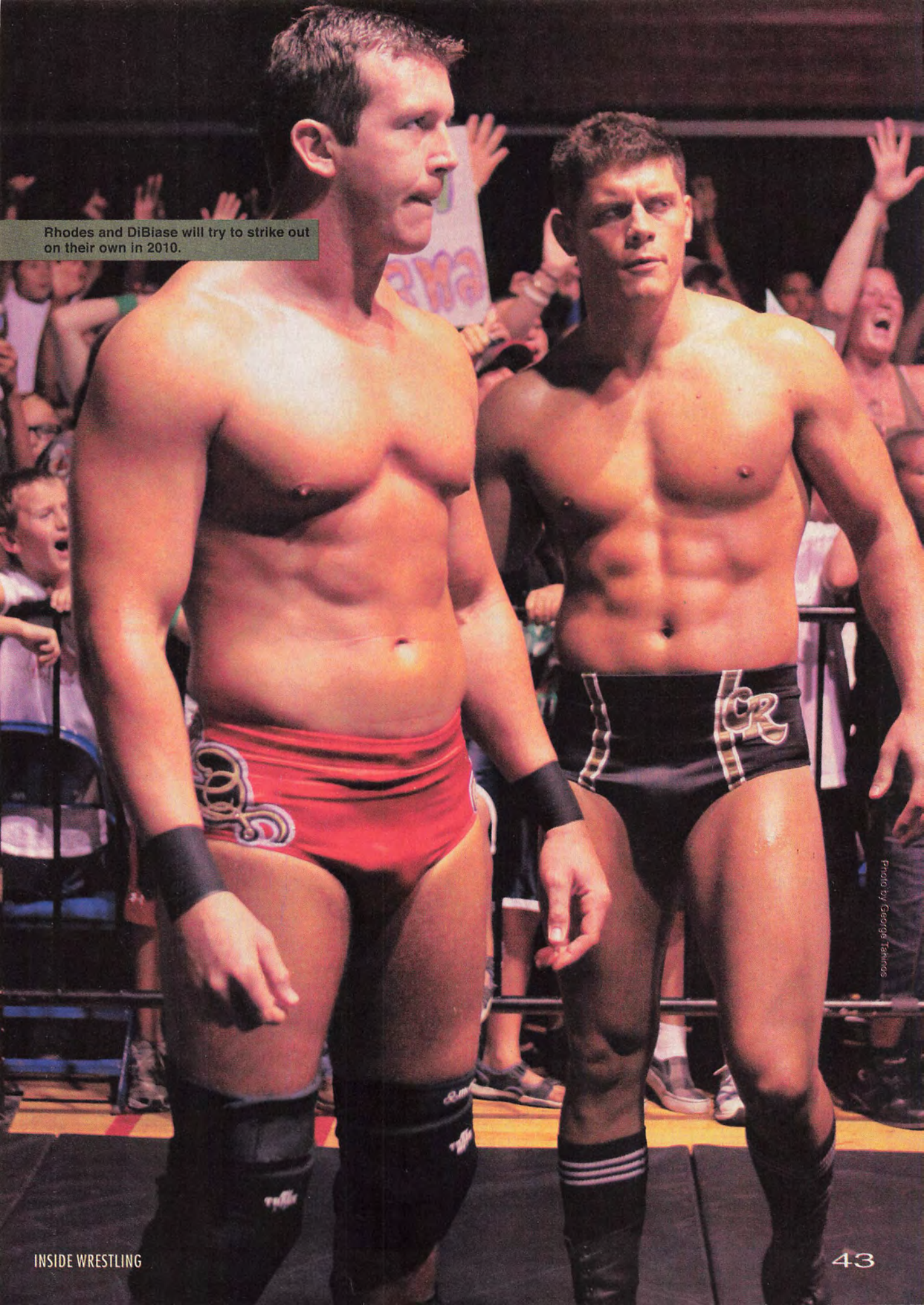
But Orton's selfish actions have already rubbed off on his charges, to the point where Rhodes and DiBiase likely feel they are beyond the tag title and are ready to break out as singles stars. DiBiase, in particular, came so close to toppling Orton in a challenge match arranged when his father, "Million-Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase, hosted *Raw* earlier in the year, that he will likely want another chance to test his mettle against the "Viper." Rhodes seems more likely—and

perhaps more comfortable—to venture out on his own, and is, at the very least, zeroing in on a U.S. or Intercontinental title reign.

Gold will not elude either Rhodes or DiBiase in 2010. The only question is whether either can step up and capture a world title so early in their respective careers. They aren't as far off as some may think.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Became the first team to ever make D-X submit, forcing Shawn Michaels to tap out to a figure-four/Million-Dollar Dream combo at Breaking Point.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Failed to capture the Unified WWE tag team title in decisive loss to Chris Jericho and The Big Show at Night of Champions.

A full-page photograph of two professional wrestlers, Ted DiBiase and Ric Flair, standing in a wrestling ring. Ted DiBiase is on the left, wearing red trunks with a white and black design on the waistband and black knee pads. Ric Flair is on the right, wearing black trunks with a white and gold design on the waistband and black knee pads. Both are shirtless and looking towards the right. The background shows a crowd of spectators in a dimly lit arena.

Rhodes and DiBiase will try to strike out on their own in 2010.

Photo by George Takas

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For The Big Show In 2010?

Fate smiled on The Big Show in 2009 when Chris Jericho came to offer him a chance to hold one half of the Unified tag team title after Edge was injured. This, after the "World's Largest Athlete" came up short yet again in a feud against John Cena. Show was in danger of getting lost in the shuffle. He took his newfound fortune seriously, even altering his ring attire for the first time in years to signify a new start.

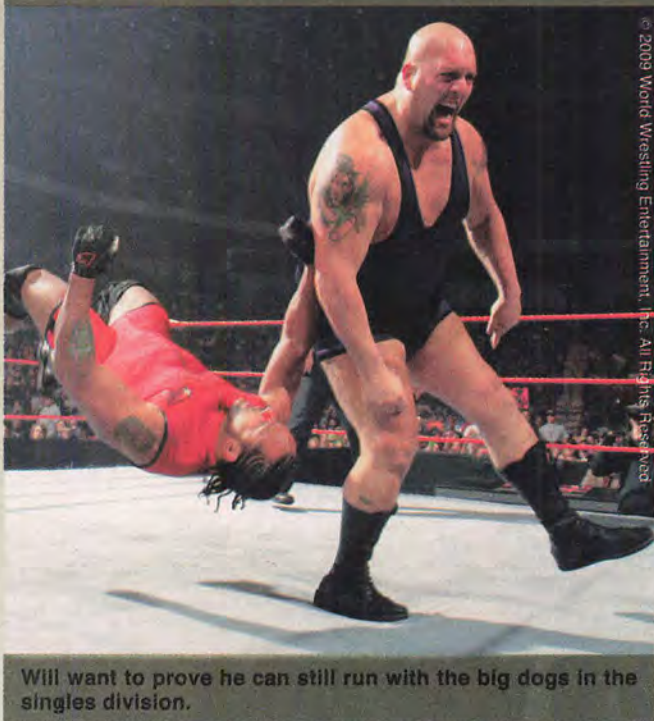
As "JeriShow" enters 2010, it does so as the most dominating tag team WWE has seen in years. But, we're dealing with two massive egos here, and it's difficult to imagine both men staying in check. The main issue is that both are former world champions who will always crave individual attention.

Jericho is surely biding his time for his next crack at a world title, and will abandon his loyalty to Show at any moment. Show will also have an eye on the championship scene, but his big weakness will be his motivation for revenge. He can't seem to get over his inability to beat Cena and has become obsessed with the idea of goading NBA great Shaquille O'Neal into a ring since O'Neal embarrassed him back in July.

At some point in 2010, some combination of the above will conspire to destroy this team and its potential to be one of the best in WWE history. Big Show, the physical attraction that he is, always seems to find his way back into the main event scene. But, he's also had long periods of aimlessness, and chances are, he will wind up enduring yet another up-and-down year.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Chosen by Chris Jericho to replace Edge as one half of the WWE Unified tag team champions, then went on to successfully defend against Legacy at Night of Champions.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Dropped by *Raw* guest host Shaquille O'Neal, with some help from Cryme Tyme, on July 27 in Washington, D.C.



Will want to prove he can still run with the big dogs in the singles division.

What's Ahead For Shawn Michaels In 2010?

Michaels was said to be despondent after falling to The Undertaker in one of the greatest matches in WrestleMania history. It was no surprise to those closest to him that he decided to take a sabbatical, stepping back to spend time with his young family and take inventory of where he currently stands.

After a while, he came to the same conclusion everyone else did—As monumental as ending "The Phenom's" WrestleMania undefeated streak would have been, the match did nothing but add to HBK's legacy. Michaels is at the stage in his career where he can work his way back into title contention at will, though that's something he hasn't opted to do in some time.

He's been more content to spend his time goofing off with Triple-H, even after his return and through D-X's late-2009 feud with Legacy.

But, just as he did last year when he geared up for his match with The Undertaker, Michaels is one of the few who can flip the switch and go straight into serious mode. HBK also never forgets, and, under the guise of a more conservative demeanor at this stage of his career, still has a massive ego that needs to be satisfied—which is why we expect him to work his way toward a rematch with The Undertaker at WrestleMania 26.

'Taker has never taken on the same opponent in consecutive years, something Michaels is well

aware of and ready to capitalize on. Should the "Dead Man" still have the World title, all the better for HBK, who is overdue for another run at the top. Those clamoring for a heel turn will be disappointed. HBK is smart enough to realize he needs to keep his friends close and his enemies even closer. That's why he's been able to survive at this game so long.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Lost in spectacular fashion to The Undertaker at WrestleMania 25 on April 5 in Houston.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Tapped out to Legacy at Breaking Point, marking the only time D-X has ever been forced to submit.

This will be the year HBK looks to add to his legacy.



WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Rey Mysterio Jr. In 2010?

The first half of Mysterio's 2009 went pretty well, culminating with the high-flyer's Intercontinental title win over JBL at WrestleMania 25. The second half ... well, it probably couldn't have gone any worse.

As if his disputed Wellness Policy violation and subsequent I-C title loss to John Morrison wasn't enough, Mysterio suffered a brutally physical and emotional betrayal at the hands of Batista at Bragging Rights.

As Mysterio enters 2010, he does so with perhaps more question marks than at any point in his career. Having accomplished just about all there is to do in WWE, at least title-wise, it will be interesting to see how he goes about cementing his legacy.

As 2009 unfolded, Mysterio showed off a slightly more abrasive side, particularly in interviews. His frustration with being unable to recapture the World heavyweight title combined with the indignity he suffered at the hands of his former best friend will finally drive one of the company's all-time "good guys" over the edge.

This isn't to say that Mysterio will turn full-on rule-breaker, though that could happen. But expect to see a much more aggressive and focused Mysterio, someone willing to pull out all the stops to get what he wants. Can Mysterio's injury-weary body survive the punishment such a shift in style would likely entail? That remains to be seen. But, clearly, Mysterio has reached a point where he realizes that the status quo just isn't doing him any good.

Mysterio has won his share of secondary titles, but his focus will return solely to making it back to the top of the WWE mountain. Don't be surprised to see him go to great lengths—even putting his mask or career on the line—to ensure that he gets there.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Retired JBL by pinning his tormentor in 21 seconds at WrestleMania 25, winning his first Intercontinental title in the process.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Was suspended for 30 days on August 27 for violating WWE's Wellness Policy, and subsequently lost I-C title to John Morrison.



Yet another push to become a world champion is in store for 2010.

What's Ahead For MVP In 2010?

MVP is the comeback kid of 2009. After an embarrassing losing streak that lasted from August 2008 to January of 2009, MVP hit the rebound after picking up a win against Big Show, albeit with a little help from Triple-H. Since then, he won back the U.S. championship and challenged for the Unified tag team belts with Mark Henry, though the two were unsuccessful.

Unfortunately, it seems MVP's career has stalled. Is it because MVP is once again losing his focus in the ring or is it just bad luck? He has had his fair share of high-level matches, yet he hasn't been victori-

ous. If things don't turn around soon, MVP will be headed back to his cocky, rulebreaking ways in 2010.


MVP is clearly a fan favorite and it would upset many to see him go back to his old ways. If MVP were to revert to his brash manner, it would be out of sheer frustration. Porter can make 2010 his year. He was in this year's Money in the Bank ladder match, so the odds are that he can make it next year too. What held him back in 2009 was the fact he went into the MITB match with the U.S. belt. If he goes in without a belt, his hunger

for championship gold will be even stronger.

He also should not give up on the tag team belts. Next year would be a good time for him and Henry to challenge "Jerishow." Show and Jericho have shown that their massive egos are at odds. MVP and Henry would be smart to exploit this to win the belts.

2009 Highlight: Breaks his losing streak on *Smackdown* against Big Show with help from Triple-H and a sledgehammer.

2009 Lowlight: Along with tag team partner Mark Henry, fails to capture the tag team title from "Jerishow."

A full-page photograph of the WWE wrestler MVP standing in a wrestling ring. He is wearing a black zip-up singlet with blue trim on the sleeves and sides, blue-trimmed black trunks, black knee pads, and black boots with blue accents. He has blue face paint around his eyes and his arms are raised in a 'V' shape. The background shows a crowd of spectators behind the ring ropes.

MVP will need to stop, look around, and collect himself if he wants to really live up to his name in 2010.

Photo by Steve Beyer

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Kofi Kingston In 2010?

Kofi Kingston had an exciting year in 2009. He impressed fans with his Money in the Bank ladder match debut, won the U.S. title, and got to compete for Team Raw at Bragging Rights. He has proven to be one of the most charismatic and exciting young wrestlers on the roster. The best things working for Kingston are that he is popular with the fans, has a unique wrestling style, and has fought some tough opponents.

Kingston has seen great success against Chris Jericho in a recent feud and had a few impressive matches against Edge before he was sidelined. While fans were disappointed The Miz take the U.S. belt from him, this gives Kofi a chance to focus on other titles.

Kingston will make 2010 his year. He'll qualify for this year's MIB match, and use his speed and athleticism to take the briefcase. When he cashes in his title shot, he'll come up short because he's not the type to stoop to wrestling a champion immediately after an exhausting match.

That experience will prove beneficial. He'll be able to elevate himself just above the mid-card and just below a true main-eventer. He'll continue to receive major title shots because champions won't be as concerned about him as they would the sport's established elite. Once he wins a world title (we're looking at 2011), his status will change once again, much like Punk.

We also expect to hear more from Kofi on the mike. He is loaded with charm and charisma, and as he progresses, we should be able to hear more from him.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Defeating MVP to win the U.S. championship on Raw.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Losing the U.S. title to Miz on Raw.



Photo by George Tahinos

The high-flying Jamaican should carry his momentum from 2009 into 2010 and become a top draw on Raw.

What's Ahead For John Morrison In 2010?

The breakout star of 2009 was easily John Morrison. After separating from The Miz, Morrison has been climbing higher and higher up the Smackdown totem pole.

Despite his former partner's taunts that Morrison would become the next Marty Jannetty, with The Miz ostensibly becoming Shawn Michaels, Morrison has already exceeded that description.

The "Shaman Of Sexy" had an incredible year, becoming one of the most popular performers on Smackdown, picking up wins over former world champion C.M. Punk, the athletically gifted Shelton Benjamin, and up-and-coming Dolph Ziggler.

Along with those wins, he

acquired the Intercontinental championship from Rey Mysterio Jr. in one of the best matches of the year on *Smackdown*.

He also had his first chance at heavyweight gold when he and Jeff Hardy went at it on *Smackdown* at the end of July. While Morrison was not successful, he proved he was at least ready for the step up in competition.

The future is red hot for the "Friday Night Delight" and it will come as a surprise if he is not a main event mainstay by the end of 2010.

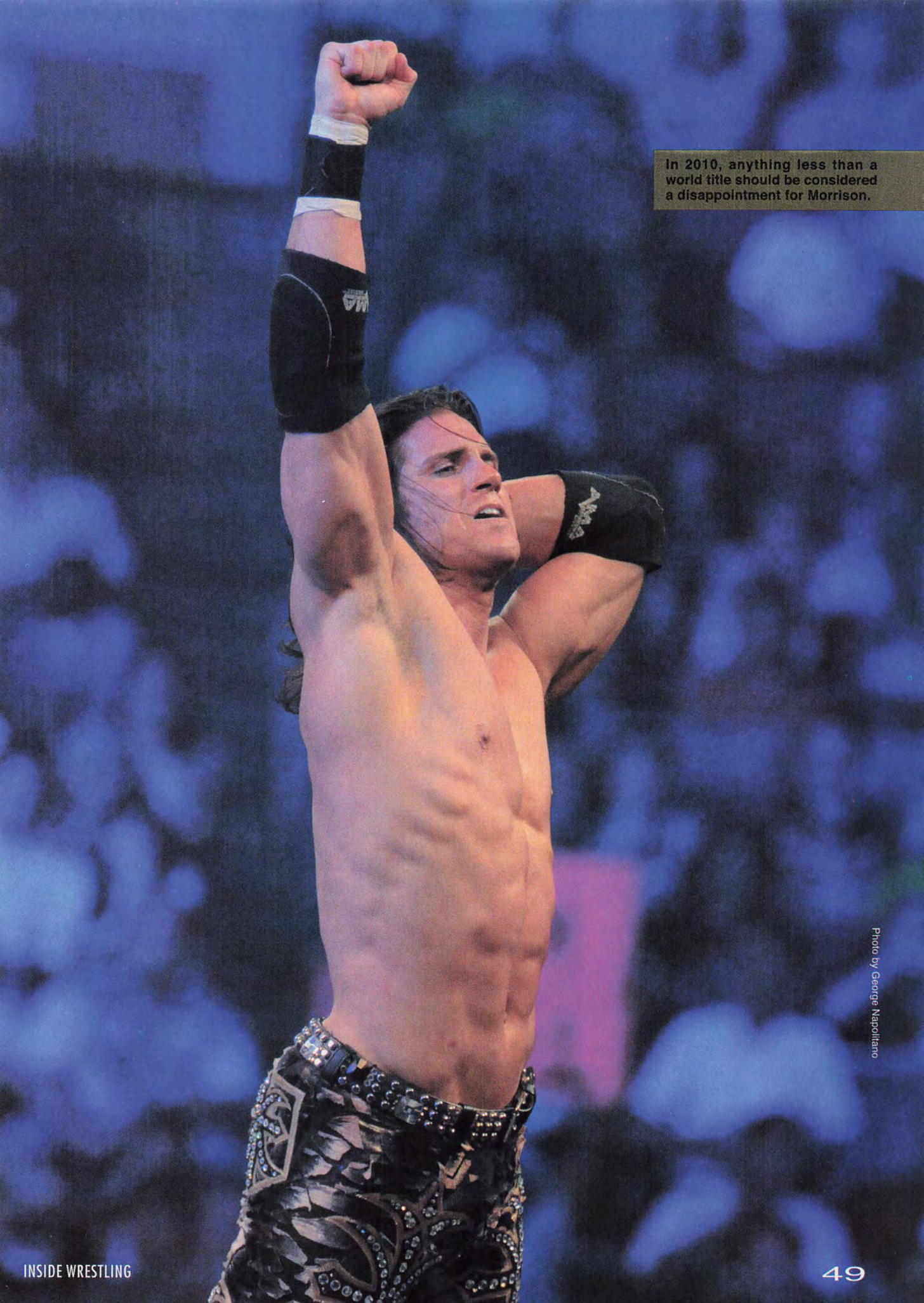
Whoever holds the World title next year should keep an eye on Morrison. Though he probably wouldn't be favored in a match

against current champions Undertaker, Christian, or Randy Orton, an upset title win is well within his grasp.

Of course, It certainly doesn't hurt that he's toned down his megalomaniacal personality and now draws cheers instead of boos from the fans. That might just provide some much-needed inspiration.

2009 HIGHPOINT: Defeating Rey Mysterio Jr. in an incredible match on *Smackdown* in September and achieving a third reign as Intercontinental champion.

2009 LOWPOINT: Coming out unsuccessful in his first heavyweight title match against then-champion Jeff Hardy on *Smackdown* in July.



In 2010, anything less than a world title should be considered a disappointment for Morrison.

Photo by George Napolitano

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Mickie James In 2010?

It has been a roller-coaster year for Mickie James. The four-time WWE Women's champion won her first Divas title and took the top spot in the 2009 "PWI Female 50" ranking, but she also struggled, losing numerous matches to Beth Phoenix and others.

James is the most decorated woman in WWE and has been on the main WWE roster for more than four years, making her one of the most senior Divas in the company. While she's one of the best all-around female wrestlers in WWE, she can also be low-key, and falls off the radar for months at a time. Based on past performance, we expect James to go into another slump, especially after her loss to Jillian on October 12.

Again, Mickie has survived those highs and lows in the past, and could very well bounce back with another championship reign in mid-2010. But with more Divas entering WWE every year, the shelf life of a WWE Diva can be pretty short. Since Mickie has already achieved just about every goal, and since there are few intriguing potential opponents she hasn't already faced, she might be in jeopardy.

We certainly don't want to see Mickie released from WWE (though WWE's loss would certainly be TNA's gain, and there would be some truly intriguing bouts for her there). We have seen her go through periods of success, followed by long stretches of mediocrity, and we expect that pattern to hold true again. However, if she can recapture her passion for a series against Michelle McCool (now that Mickie has been dealt to Smackdown), a fifth Women's title is a distinct possibility for 2010.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: It was a controversial pick, but Mickie edged out Melina and Angelina Love to take top honors in the "PWI Female 50."

2009 LOWLIGHT: Mickie certainly didn't look like a champion on October 12 when she lost to Jillian Hall in a short, forgettable match. It may have been the flattest performance of her career.



Expect a lull period ahead for Mickie James. But be patient, a title is likely within her grasp before 2010 ends.

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What's Ahead For Tyler Black In 2010?

We've been calling Tyler Black the future of Ring of Honor for so long, it's starting to feel like he has become the past of Ring of Honor.

The brooding Midwesterner had his breakout performance way back at Take No Prisoners 2008, where he came within a hair's breadth of taking the ROH crown from Nigel McGuinness. His gutsy performance in that match made him an instant fan favorite and put him on the short list of Potential ROH champions. It has been more than 20 months since that match, and we're still waiting. It's time for Black to live up to expectations or to slink back down to the mid-card level.

The timing couldn't be better for the former Age of the Fall member.

He matches up extremely well against reigning champion Austin Aries. He has a slight size advantage over the champ (an advantage Black rarely enjoys) and can match Aries in mat wrestling, aerial maneuvers, and brawling.

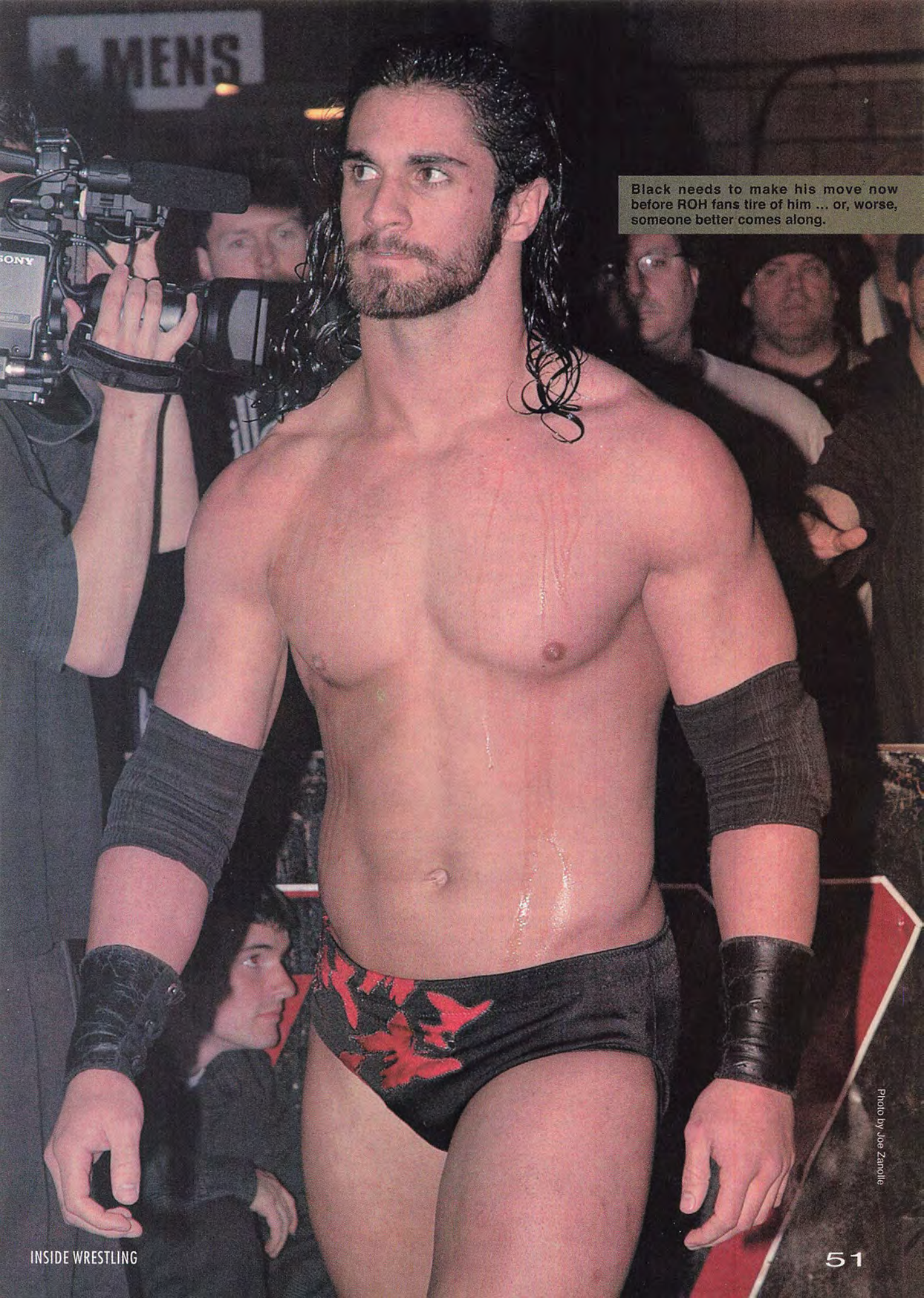
By winning the 2009 Survival of the Fittest tournament, Black has reasserted his claim to the ROH title. He has momentum on his side after largely squandering his initial momentum from Take No Prisoners. He can't afford to make that same mistake again.

It's time for drastic action. Black needs to demand title shots and make the most of them. He needs to make a stand. Now that McGuinness and Bryan Danielson

have pulled up stakes and left the company, the path to the championship is uncluttered. The first six months of 2010 will tell us if Black can take the next step, or if he's just another flash in the pan.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Won the 2009 Survival of the Fittest tournament, beating Kenny King to qualify, then surviving an elimination match against heavy-hitters Roderick Strong, Chris Hero, Colt Cabana, Claudio Castagnoli, and Delirious.

2009 LOWLIGHT: At Manhattan Mayhem III, Black lost a first-blood bout to Jimmy Jacobs (though Jacobs certainly took a beating), then Black cashed in a title shot, only to have Aries win the title in a three-way involving Black and champion Jerry Lynn. It was a night of crushing disappointments.



Black needs to make his move now before ROH fans tire of him ... or, worse, someone better comes along.

Photo by Joe Zanolle

WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Michelle McCool In 2010?

The first woman ever to win both the Divas and WWE Women's championships is carving out a niche as the most vicious woman on any WWE brand. McCool has dominated Smackdown since winning the women's title from Melina at The Bash in June. Her fast-paced attacks and surprisingly vicious tactics (including very stiff kicks, hair pulls, and wrenching armbars) have helped her turn away the likes of Melina, Eve Torres, and other challengers, but the trade that sent Mickie James and Beth Phoenix from Raw to Smackdown is about to rock McCool's world.

McCool shouldn't be running scared from these new challenges, however. She has an opportunity to silence her critics if she's able to successfully defend her belt against former champions Phoenix and James.

While McCool has collected championships, there are still serious questions about how she'll fare against top competition. She won the vacant Divas title with an upset win over Natalya and lost that belt to the then-unheralded Maryse. She needed a healthy assist from Alicia Fox to wrestle the Women's title away from Melina, and has been defending that title against a steady diet of inexperienced women such as Eve, Maria Kanellis, and Layla. If she wants to be known as a dominant (and worthy) champion, McCool is going to have to beat some bigger names, and those matchups are on their way.

With her impressive submission grappling and mean streak, McCool might just have what it takes to fend off James and Phoenix, and the next 12 months will certainly show us what she's made of.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: McCool raised plenty of eyebrows when she defeated Gail Kim to become the top contender to the Women's title in May. Fresh from her stint as TNA's top Knockout, Kim was humbled by the former Diva Search contestant.

2009 LOWLIGHT: McCool's January feud with Maria (whom she blamed for costing her the Divas title) made Michelle look like a bully and a sore loser, and did nothing to get her back into title contention.



McCool will have an interesting 2010 trying to prove that she deserves to wear the Women's title.

What's Ahead For ODB In 2010?

Who would have thought the "One Night With ODB" contest would prove to be the pivotal event of 2009 for ODB?

The decidedly un-ladylike Knockout opened 2009 as part of TNA's Frontline, but was mostly there for moral support as she rarely mixed it up with the Main Event Mafia. She came out on the losing end of a feud with Awesome Kong and her Kongterage, and then spent her time hosting an interview segment that seemed designed just to make people uncomfortable.

By the time TNA launched the "One Night With ODB" contest, ODB's career had stalled and she was barely getting face time on TV. Fortunately for her, she chose Cody

Deaner as her beau, and the red-neck "Brangelina" became a featured commodity on *Impact*.

With Deaner at her side, ODB resumed her long-running feud with The Beautiful People, with Deaner scoring the winning pinfall at Hard Justice to deliver the Knockouts title to Team ODB. Ultimately, ODB beat Deaner to take sole possession of the title, and the dirty one has been on a winning streak ever since.

ODB is going to have her work cut out for her as champion, however. With the influx of Sarita, Alissa Flash, and Hamada, the bar for female wrestling has been raised considerably. ODB is a basic brawler who struggles against talented technicians. She's going to have

trouble surviving against the new, more athletic wave of challengers, let alone dangerous contenders like Kong and Daffney.

ODB will likely lose the title by year's end. By early-2010, she'll be back in a mid-card comedy role, and probably back to the interview segment. Her championship days are numbered, but knowing her, reading this forecast will be all the motivation she needs to fool us all.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Earning a future Knockouts title shot by scoring the winning pinfall at Genesis.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Spending weeks off TV "training" Cody Deaner. She lost all her momentum while playing a supporting role in those comedy skits.

She may enjoy a nice run as Knockouts champ, but don't expect this dirty girl to maintain a sustained run as champ in 2010.



WHAT'S AHEAD IN 2010?

What's Ahead For Melina In 2010?

Melina is the first WWE Diva who has consistently been able to find ways to beat Beth Phoenix, which in itself is an impressive accomplishment. She also reigned as WWE Women's champion for five months, and won her first Divas title shortly before press time.

Yet, despite those achievements, 2009 has been a bittersweet year for Melina. In April, she was visibly upset when she learned she had been traded from Raw to Smackdown. The move to the blue brand separated her from some close friends and put her in a deep funk, and may have contributed in some ways to her dropping the Women's title to Michelle McCool just a couple months after arriving on Smackdown.

Now that Melina is back on Monday nights, she is back in her comfort zone. The trade that sent her back to Raw also bounced Phoenix and Mickie James over to Smackdown, which leaves Melina as the uncontested flag-bearer of the Divas division on Raw.

Elsewhere in this magazine, we make a case for Rey Mysterio as the most important wrestler in WWE. A big reason for that claim is because of Mysterio's popularity with the growing demographic of Hispanic fans. The same can be said of the bilingual Melina, a Los Angeles native of Mexican descent. Once known mostly for her dramatic ring entrances, Melina has developed into a top-notch wrestler with a growing fan base. Now that she is back on Raw, Melina goes into 2010 as the flagship female on WWE's flagship brand. She may not hold the Divas title for all of 2010, but we don't expect she'll be very far from the title scene, either.

2009 Highlight: Making a triumphant return to Raw on October 12 and surprising Jillian Hall to claim the Divas title.

2009 Lowlight: Taking a major beating from McCool at Night of Champions and suffering a clean pinfall loss against an opponent many expected her to beat.



Photo by George Napolitano

Making a case for being the most important Diva in WWE today.

What's Ahead For Tara In 2010?

In January, the former Victoria wrestled her final match in WWE and expressed an interest in training for mixed martial arts. She then got into a verbal catfight with MMA fighter Kim Couture, with the two ladies trading barbs via Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, and various online wrestling forums.

Victoria's "retirement" lasted a mere four months (and was punctuated with an appearance at WrestleMania no less). She arrived in TNA as Tara, with a new pet tarantula in tow. Tara won the Knockouts title from Angelina Love barely a month into her TNA run, but her reign lasted a disappointing two weeks, and an ill-advised feud

with Awesome Kong and a tag team with Christy Hemme have kept her out of title contention ever since.

It's obvious that Tara still wants to try her hand in MMA, and her altercation with Couture at Bound for Glory is a step in that direction. It's too soon to know if Tara vs. Couture will occur within TNA's six-sided ring or if Strikeforce will promote it, but that matchup now seems inevitable. That's a mixed blessing for Tara.


While a MMA bout against Couture could yield a big payday for her (especially considering how well the Gina Carano/Cris Cyborg fight did), it's hard to imagine her winning the fight under MMA rules. At 38

years old and with a bad knee, the odds of her making a successful MMA debut against an accomplished fighter like Couture are not good, and this MMA feud will only keep her further sidetracked from the Knockouts title.

If she were to concentrate on wrestling only, another World title is certainly in the offing.

2009 HIGHLIGHT: Beating Velvet Sky and Angelina Love in succession to win the Knockouts title on the July 9 episode of Impact.

2009 LOWLIGHT: Returning for the WrestleMania battle royal and not even getting a ring introduction for a match won by "Santina" Marella.

A full-page photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black strappy outfit with silver rings and chains. She has a fierce, shouting expression on her face, with her mouth wide open and her right hand behind her head. She is wearing fishnet stockings and a wide black belt with multiple chains. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Tara looks to take her championship ways from TNA to MMA.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

The Undertaker

"I'm well enough to go out and beat anyone in WWE."

THE TERM "living legend" is overused throughout the sports and entertainment worlds. But in the case of seven-time world champion The Undertaker, the moniker is both fitting and ironic. Now approaching his 20th year with the company, the "Dead Man" has established a legacy as one of the sport's all-time great performers and most athletic big men. His enduring popularity is a testament to his ability to make crowds believe that the 6'10" wrestler is immortal, at least inside the squared circle.

It's also fair to say that reports of his demise are greatly exaggerated. Undertaker has recovered slowly from what was originally deemed minor hip surgery, and there were rumblings that his hip and back were still bothering him more than he let on. The whispers were muted (at least for the time being) when 'Taker won the World championship from C.M. Punk. In so doing, 'Taker added to the credentials that have already gotten him inducted in **The Wrestling Observer Hall of Fame** and will make him a shoo-in for the WWE Hall of Fame.

One of the main attractions to any WrestleMania, of course, is The Undertaker's annual bid to keep his perfect record intact at the WWE's biggest event of the year. Now 17-0, he's had several close calls in recent years, including his instant-classic victory over Shawn Michaels in 2009. The debate over who, if anyone, will end the streak is sure to spark passion among fans.



"I've always had the attitude that regardless of the outcome of a particular match, the other guy is going to leave in worse shape than me."

Of late, The Undertaker has even been unusually talkative. He has cut several lengthy monologues on **Smackdown**, answering the skeptics who have written the epitaph on his career, and asserted that he alone will decide when the time comes to fade away from the world title picture. Having been previously stripped of the title because of a now-lifted ban on his gogoplata-style chokehold, Undertaker has made it known that the next titlist will have to beat him decisively this time.

As part of his newfound garrulousness, the World champion granted an interview to Contributing Writer Bill Meltzer. Rather than looking back at his storied career, the champion insisted that the focus be on his immediate future and upcoming goals.

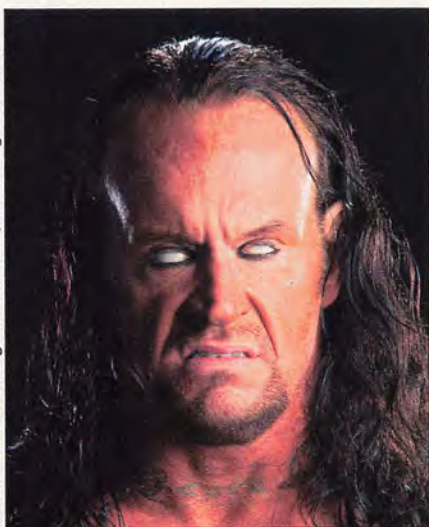
Q: Congratulations are in order for regaining the World championship. When you first started out with WWE in 1990, could you ever have foreseen yourself as a seven-time world champion and a senior statesman?

A: I've never thought about my career in those terms. The passage of time is inevitable and unchangeable, and I've always kept my attention looking ahead to destroying the next obstacle in my path. I don't allow myself to get self-satisfied or to pause to turn back and look at what's behind me. I just keep moving forward.

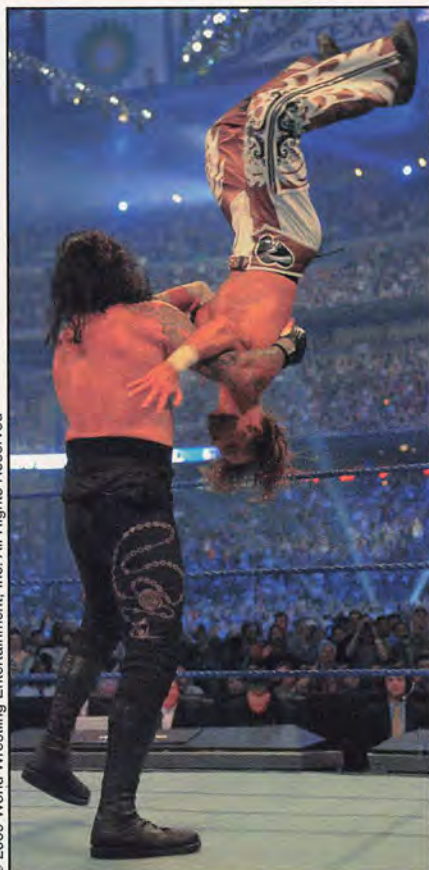
Q: Despite losing the title, C.M. Punk very much remains a thorn in your side. Would you say he's the main obstacle to the type of title reign you've recently spoken about at length on television?

A: Punk is a tremendous wrestler, but he tries to project this feeling of superiority to everyone. I know the truth. I've looked into his eyes and seen the fear he has of me. For good reason. He knows full well that the road to the World





"I've put out a warning to Punk and everyone else who wants the belt that they are free to challenge me, but they're digging their own graves."



'Taker and Shawn Michaels put on one of the best performances at WM25. Though he says he isn't concerned about his WM undefeated streak, The Undertaker doesn't seem ready to just let it end.

title leads through me as long as I'm on the scene. When I set my sights on a goal, I reach it. I've put out a warning to Punk and everyone else who wants the belt that they are free to challenge me, but they're digging their own graves. Cross me at your own peril.

Q: How much longer do you think you'll be able to keep your WrestleMania record perfect? And do you have any preferred challenger for next year—could we see a title bout with Punk or a rematch with Shawn Michaels, for instance?

A: I've never been the one who makes a big deal out of my WrestleMania record. I just go out with the same goal every time, and if it happens at some WrestleMania that I'm not the one to win that particular match, well, I'm still going to win the war. In terms of opponent, the match with Shawn was one of those nights where everything fell in place. I don't know if we would be able to duplicate it, but it would be great to try to improve on it. If it's not Michaels or Punk, well, whoever it is will meet their demise.

Q: I've followed your career since your days as Mean Mark Callous in WCW. Beyond adding all the tattoos and other changes to your outward physical appearance, you have also evolved in the ring over the years. It's not just about signature moves such as walking the top rope and delivering the Tombstone. You have worked hard to introduce new moves as well as changes to your look.

A: Yes. The business changes and I evolve right along with it. I've adapted the way I eat, the way I train, everything. I added the Hell's Gate chokehold, for exam-



Photo by George Napolitano

C.M. Punk wasn't the only one surprised when Undertaker made his return at SummerSlam. Fans didn't expect to see the "Dead Man" after he had taken an extended break following his match at WrestleMania 25.

ple, because those MMA style moves have become important to a lot of wrestlers' repertoires. The Undertaker name and basic personality stays the same, but I bring out different aspects, both inside the ring and out. As long as I stay true to myself, it all seems to work.

Q: Would you say that's the secret to your longevity? Your former longtime manager, Paul Bearer, has said about you that crowds pick up on the eerie calm you convey, even when you're on the receiving end of punishment. Your reactions create a sense of impending doom for your opponents.

A: In wrestling, your body language will give you away every time. It's in your facial expressions, the way you move and in your gaze. If you project uncertainty or fear, I don't care how much the announcers and promoters tell the fans you seem unbeatable, people won't believe it. You have to believe it yourself. I've always had the attitude that regardless of the outcome of a particular match, the other guy

is going to leave in worse shape than me.

Q: How important is your methodical pacing in the ring to creating the aura you convey?

A: There's no need to rush. Ever see what goes into making a building implode? It's not a quick process, although the end result is a sight to see when the explosives are detonated and the structure crumbles to the ground. The end for my opponent may come suddenly in one of my matches, but there's a lot that's leading up to it.

Q: Your ring entrances are methodical, too, and are clearly a big part of your persona. From the first dirge-like bell tones of your entrance theme, it seems like you aren't even moving your feet as you approach the ring. It's almost like you are standing on a slow-moving conveyor belt that's pulling you to the ring. I've always wondered how you do that.

A: Keep wondering.

Q: Fair enough. Let's talk about the flip side of the equation. No one can always be on the offensive in a match. Most people talk about your athleticism, power, and the Tombstone pile driver. I've never seen another wrestler who looks more in control of a

match at the junctures where you are the one down on the mat or bleeding. The retribution always seems inevitable.

A: The Undertaker loves punishment, whether it's my own or that of my opponent. I've never minded spilling some of my own blood early in a match if it means spilling a lot more of the other guy's by the end.

Q: Like most veteran wrestlers, you have an assortment of chronic injuries that you have to deal with. Knowing that your hip and back issues are something that Punk and other opponents plan to target, what adjustments have you made in and out of the ring?

A: I don't dwell on injuries. That creates an easy excuse for why something doesn't go right in the ring. Obviously, you try to protect yourself in the ring and you try to do exercises to compensate. You stretch more before a match and follow a routine. But I can honestly say that an injury doesn't alter my thinking about a match. The truth of the matter is that I'm well enough to go out and beat anyone in WWE.

Q: At 44 years old, how much longer do you see yourself wrestling?

A: I've said it on several occa-



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"If I know in my soul that it's the time to go, I'll be the first one to say it's time for The Undertaker to rest in peace."

sions and I'll say it again. When the time comes to step away, I'll know it. I'm not going to put a time frame on it and then un-retire a bunch of times. If I know in my soul that it's the time to go, I'll be the first one to say it's time for The Undertaker to rest in peace. Until then, there will be a lot of sleepless nights for my opponents. I didn't set my sights on defending this title to walk away from it anytime soon. □



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Part of the allure of The Undertaker is his ability to intimidate foes before he even fights his match. Whether it be with his hair-raising entrances (above left) or his spellbinding promos (above right), 'Taker knows just the right way to get into his opponents' heads before the first sound of the bell.

What Was Vince McMahon's Motivation In Signing Bryan Danielson?

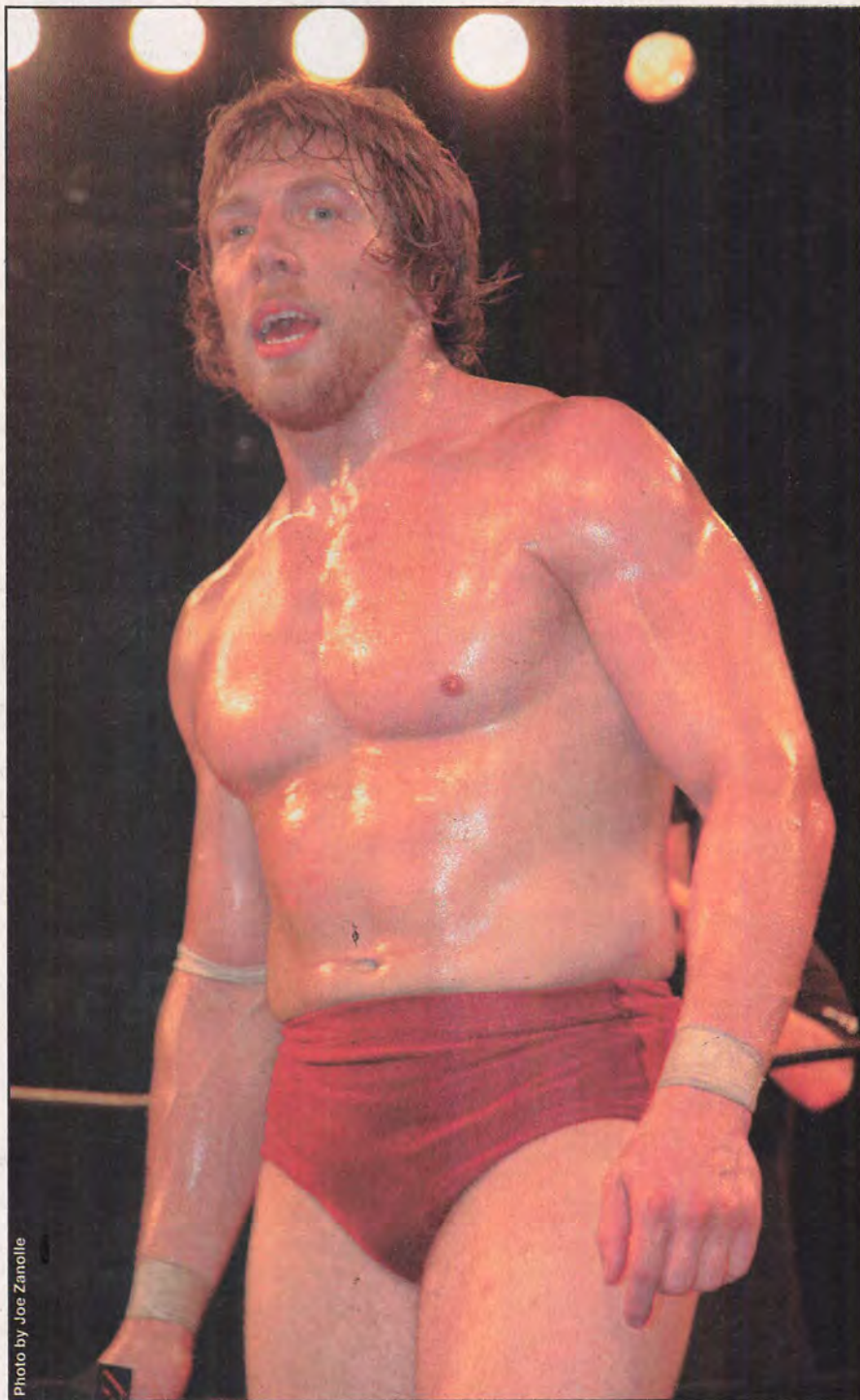


Photo by Joe Zanolle

Indy fans have touted Bryan Danielson as "The Best In The World" for years. Only now will we get to see if WWE will respect that opinion or choose to bury the "American Dragon" in its mid-card.

IT WAS ALWAYS A question of when, not if. When would Vince McMahon and his WWE talent scouts take notice of Bryan Danielson, a wrestling prodigy whose incomparable talents have won the respect of his peers and fans worldwide? It should have come as a surprise to no one that WWE began wooing Danielson with the tantalizing carrot-on-a-stick of worldwide fame earlier this year. But many observers are wondering if such glitter is truly gold, or what motives the ever-strategizing McMahon has for luring Danielson away from Ring of Honor, where he forged his reputation. Speculation abounds that McMahon may be acquiring more than an excellent wrestler—he may also be acquiring leverage, increased market share, and pure bragging rights. To address and discuss such speculation, Publisher Stu Saks recently summoned to his boardroom a group of editors. The following is a transcript of the discussion among Saks, Editor-in-Chief Frank Krewda, and Contributing Writers C.F. Hunter and Brady Hicks.

STU SAKS: Good morning, guys, and thanks for dragging yourselves in for this meeting.

BRADY HICKS: It is an ungodly hour for a meeting!

SAKS: It's 9:30 in the morning, Brady.

HICKS: Exactly. Ungodly early. We were at an ROH show at The Arena last night, hung out with the boys afterward ...

C.F. HUNTER: ... Went to the after-party ...

FRANK KREWDA: ... And the after-after-party.

SAKS: Well, perhaps you three might actually prove useful then, since I wanted to discuss matters

relating to Ring of Honor. Pour yourselves some coffee and ponder this question: What are the motivations behind WWE signing Bryan Danielson?

HICKS: Yeah. Danielson is an amazing wrestler. WWE hires world-class talent.

HUNTER: Sorry, Brady, but you're being naïve.

HICKS: Naïve? I'm being sensible. WWE hires top wrestlers. That's why WWE is the biggest promotion in the world. It's that simple.

"I hope Danielson gets the chance to show the world just how talented he really is. But it could work in WWE's favor to bury him deep in the lower tiers of the roster."

—C.F. Hunter

HUNTER: Sometimes it's that simple, yes. But the case of Danielson is different. I don't think Vince McMahon's motivations are as simple and noble as Brady insists.

KREWDA: You think he has a hidden agenda?

HUNTER: Not terribly hidden, but for his sake, I hope Danielson gets the chance to show the world just how talented he really is. But it could work in WWE's favor to bury him deep in the lower tiers of the roster.

KREWDA: How so? Danielson has more raw talent than a lot of those mid-card WWE guys. Hell, he's got more talent than many of the main-eventers. Why would WWE under-utilize him?

HUNTER: Maybe to send a message.

HICKS: What message?



Photo by Joe Zanolle

After Danielson signed with WWE, fans were left to wonder the fate of ROH. When Nigel McGuinness signed with TNA shortly thereafter, wonder turned to fear. But, as Editor-in-Chief Frank Krewda points out, ROH was a strong promotion before the two arrived, and should stand tall in the aftermath of their departure.

HUNTER: This message: We decide who's a superstar and who's a jabroni. A message to all the indy promoters and wrestlers and blogging fans, reminding everyone WWE is the big dog in the wrestling business and that "indy cred" doesn't mean squat to the WWE marketing machine.

HICKS: So you think WWE wants to make an example of Danielson?

HUNTER: I hope not. He deserves superstardom. But look at WWE's history of burying talented guys hired from other promotions.

KREWDA: Like Monty Brown? WWE hired him away from TNA, renamed him Marcus Cor Von, and

promptly dumped him into a curtain-jerking position.

Then there's Chris Harris. Big star in TNA, signed to WWE, had a few crummy matches and was let go. Even Goldberg and RVD weren't handled in the manner they should've been, and I don't think it was a coincidence.

HUNTER: And Christian certainly didn't get a hero's welcome back to WWE, despite his impressive run as the TNA champ ... or perhaps because of his run as TNA champ. It seems WWE has a habit of downplaying any success a wrestler has enjoyed outside of WWE.

HICKS: That's not necessarily true. Look at Steve Austin, Rey Mysterio Jr., Eddie Guerrero, Triple-H—they were much more successful in WWE than in any previous promotions. WWE made them true superstars.

"ROH is a solid promotion, top to bottom. There's a lot more to that roster than just Danielson and McGuinness. Remember, those two were mid-carders themselves at one point."

—Frank Krewda

SAKS: All good points. Clearly, WWE is a place where stars can be made, or stars can be extinguished. But, Brady, you've reminded me of another angle I want to discuss. In mentioning names like Austin, Mysterio, and their ilk, you alluded to the well-known fact that WWE has been known to acquire talent from their competition.

HUNTER: You're talking about talent raids.

SAKS: That's a matter of semantics. What I'm saying is, the signing of Danielson could be viewed as an attempt by WWE to sabotage Ring of Honor by taking the promotion's top talent. Is Vince McMahon trying to crush ROH now that it has established itself as a strong promotion with a weekly TV show?

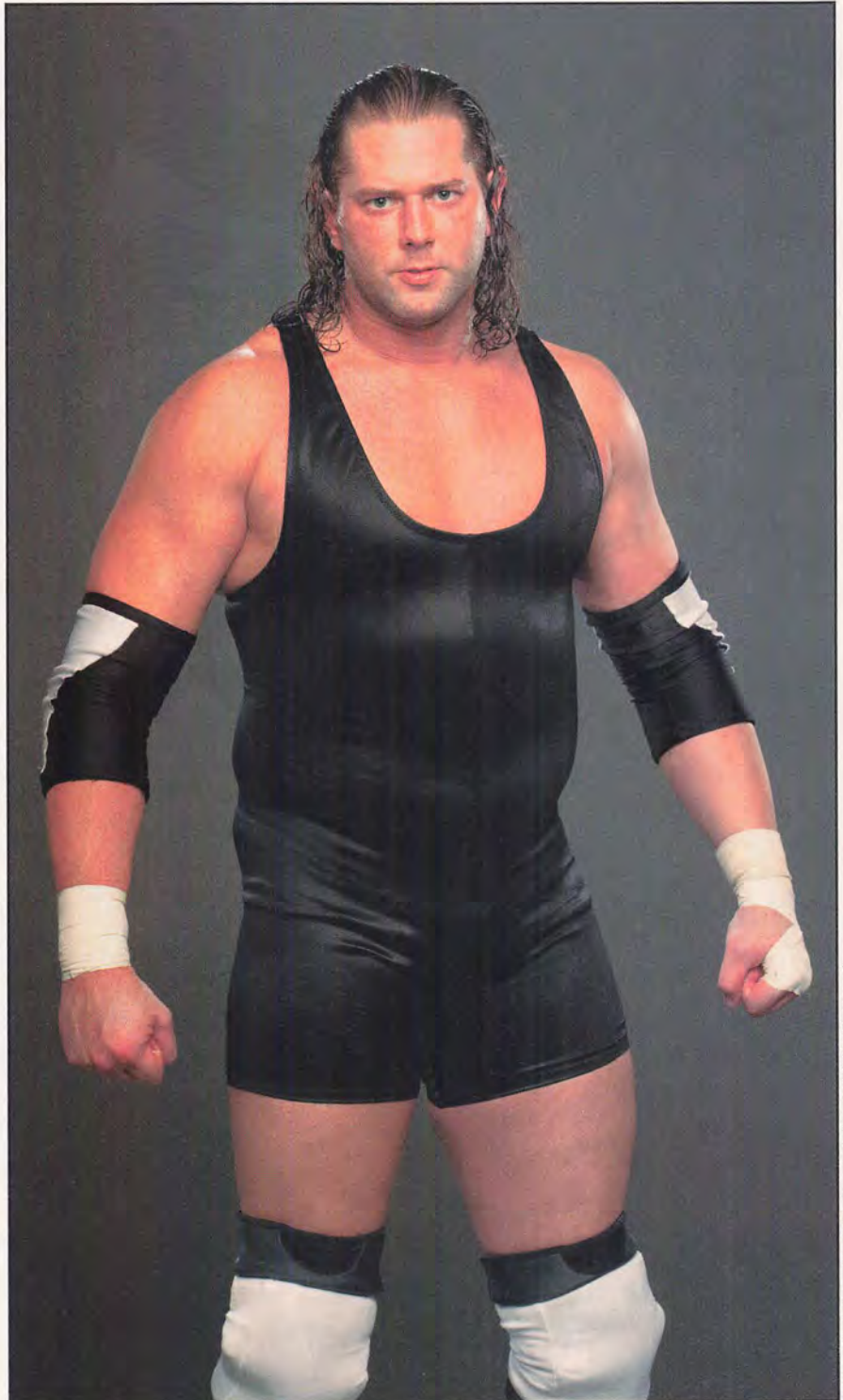
KREWDA: It could also be a

preemptive strike against TNA.

SAKS: What to you mean, Frank?

KREWDA: I mean WWE must be aware of the relationship between TNA and ROH over the years. Lots of ROH guys, like Jay Lethal, Samoa Joe, A.J. Styles, and Austin Aries, just to name a

few, have jumped back and forth between promotions. The relationship hasn't always been a bowl of cherries, but clearly there is some level of cooperation. All I'm saying is maybe Vince wanted to get Danielson in house before TNA had a chance to snatch him up.



Chris Harris is just one of several wrestlers to hit a wall after arriving in WWE from an outside promotion. Speculation abounds that Danielson will experience a similar fate.

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SAKS: Interesting ... and plausible. You guys said you were at the party after last night's ROH show. What were the wrestlers saying about the departures of Danielson and McGuinness?

HUNTER: Generally, there are mixed feelings.

HICKS: Yeah, very mixed. Some are worried that ROH will struggle to survive without top guys like McGuinness and Danielson.

HUNTER: But others are stoked about it. It will mean new opportunities for some of the mid-card guys to possibly rise to main-event status.

KREWDA: Yeah, let's be honest. ROH is a solid promotion, top to bottom. There's a lot more to that roster than just Danielson and McGuinness. Remember, those two were mid-carders themselves at one point.

HUNTER: True. Their departures could be the opportunity some new prodigy needs to become the next breakout star. ROH has no shortage of hungry young talent with tons of potential.

KREWDA: So even if McMahon is trying to cut the legs out from under ROH, the effect might be the opposite.

HUNTER: Make no mistake, ROH will likely suffer temporarily from losing two of its most talented competitors. But if ROH promoters play their cards right, the company could spin the negative into a positive.

HICKS: And if Danielson gets the attention he deserves in WWE and becomes a top-level performer there, that will lend even more credibility to his previous stomping grounds, ROH, as a place where the hottest young wrestlers ply their trade.

SAKS: So would it be fair to say that you guys view the signing of Danielson to WWE as positive development?

HUNTER: I sincerely hope so. Wrestlers of his caliber deserve the attention and compensation that only WWE can offer. No one can blame him for wanting to play in the big leagues.

KREWDA: If WWE does the right



Photo by Joe Zanolle

Perhaps the only positive ROH can take from Danielson and McGuinness' signing is the opportunity their departure presents to younger stars such as Kenny King. As established stars leave ROH, younger stars will be challenged to take their place.

thing and allows him to showcase his talents, the sky is the limit.

HICKS: And if ROH can give similar opportunities to some of their stars-in-the-making, the pro-

motion should be able to survive this talent raid, or whatever you want to call it.

SAKS: Good points, all of them. Thanks, guys. □

wrestling timeline



DECEMBER 27, 1994:

Now wrestling as Jean-Paul Levesque is pinned by Alex Wright in WCW pay-per-view debut at Starcade.

JANUARY 21, 1996:

Loses to Duke "The Dumpster" Droese by disqualification in the "Free For All" prior to the Royal Rumble PPV.

JULY 27, 1969:

Born in Nashua, New Hampshire.

JULY 17, 1992:

Using the name Terra Ryzing, defeats Mad Dog Richard to become IWF heavyweight champion.



APRIL 30, 1995:

Makes WWF debut as "Connecticut Blueblood" Hunter Hearst Helmsley on *WWF Wrestling Challenge*.



MAY 19, 1996:

Breaks character with fellow "Kliq" members Shawn Michaels, Diesel, and Razor Ramon in what became known as the "MSG Incident."

Triple-H

INSIDE WRESTLING journeys back in time to examine the career of a superstar who has left a major imprint on the sport



OCTOBER 21, 1996:

With Mr. Perfect as his manager, defeats Mark Mero to capture first Intercontinental title.



JUNE 8, 1997:

Pins Mankind in finals of the King of the Ring tournament.

DECEMBER 22, 1997:

Claims European championship when Shawn Michaels surrenders the title to him on *Raw*.

MARCH 23, 1997:

Defeats Goldust at WrestleMania 13.

SEPTEMBER 20, 1997:

Officially forms D-Generation X at One Night Only PPV in Birmingham, England, along with Shawn Michaels, Chyna, and Rick Rude.

MARCH 30, 1998:

Becomes sole leader of D-X one night after WrestleMania XIV, introducing X-Pac, Road Dogg Jesse James, and Billy Gunn as new members.





JANUARY 25, 1999:

Loses to WWF champion The Rock in an "I Quit" match on *Raw*.

AUGUST 23, 1999:

Pins Mankind to capture first WWF championship on *Raw*.

DECEMBER 12, 1999:

Defeats Vince McMahon in No Holds Barred match with help of Stephanie McMahon as McMahon-Helmsley Era begins.

MARCH 28, 1999:

Defeats Kane at WrestleMania XV, then joins The Corporation by helping Shane McMahon retain European title against X-Pac.

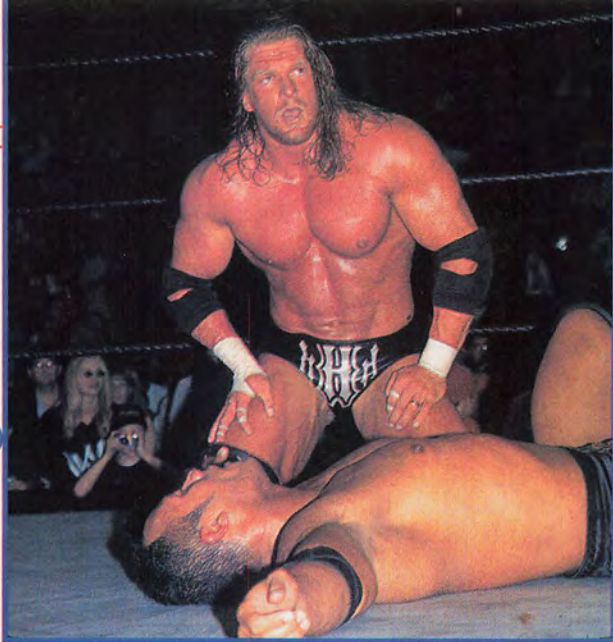
SEPTEMBER 26, 1999:

After losing WWF title to Vince McMahon, wins vacant strap in Six-Pack Challenge at Unforgiven by defeating Steve Austin, The Rock, Mankind, Kane, and Davey Boy Smith.

FEBRUARY 27, 2000:

Sends Mick Foley into temporary retirement, winning a violent Hell in a Cell match at No Way Out.





APRIL 2, 2000:

Pins The Rock in a four-way main event at WrestleMania 2000, becoming the first "rulebreaker" to leave WrestleMania in possession of the WWF title.

APRIL 29, 2001:

Joins Shawn Michaels and becomes only the second Grand Slam champion when he and Steve Austin team to defeat Kane and the Undertaker for the WWE tag team titles at Backlash.

JANUARY 20, 2002:

Wins Royal Rumble in PPV return, last eliminating Kurt Angle.

APRIL 1, 2001:

Loses to The Undertaker at WrestleMania X-Seven.

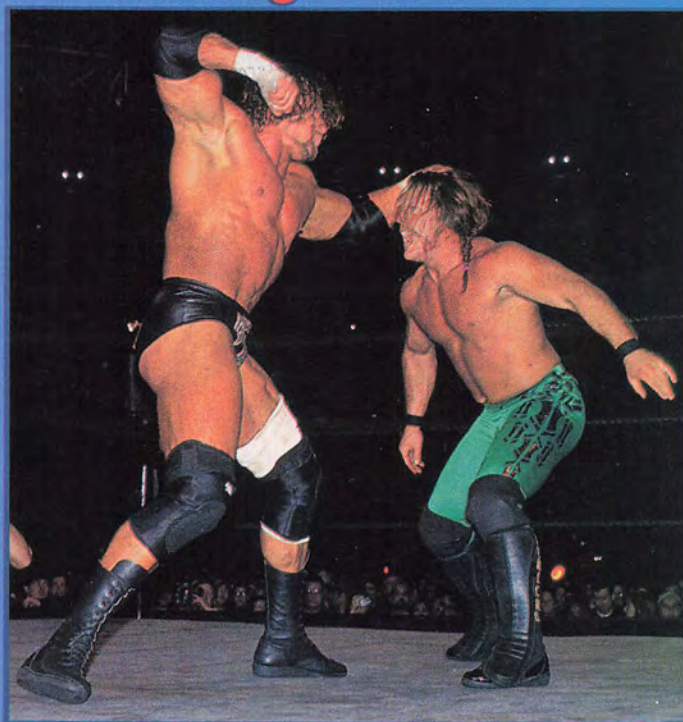


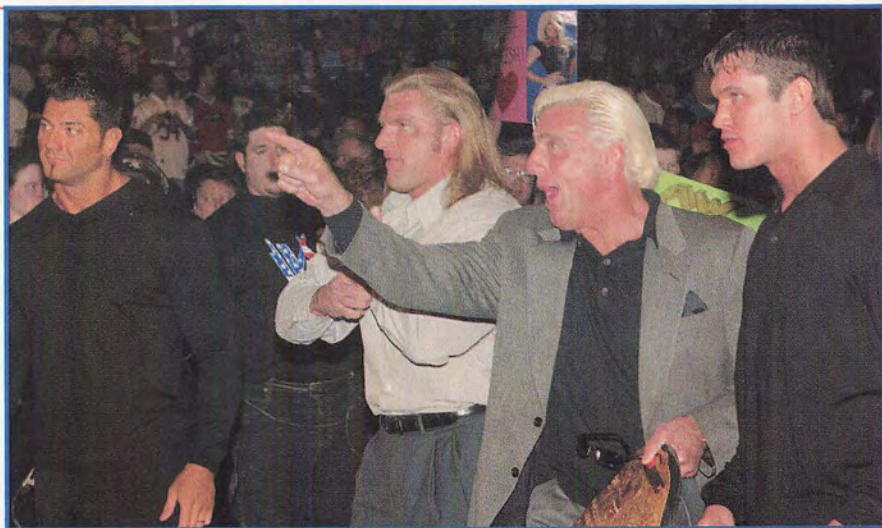
MAY 21, 2001:

Suffers career-threatening left quad tear during tag title loss to Chris Jericho and Chris Benoit on Raw.

MARCH 17, 2002:

Pins Chris Jericho at WrestleMania X8 to become the WWF undisputed champion.





APRIL 21, 2002:

Loses title to Hulk Hogan at Backlash, and became exclusive to the Smackdown roster due to the draft.

SEPTEMBER 2, 2002:

Named first WWE World champion by Bischoff after WWF heavyweight champion Brock Lesnar became exclusive to Smackdown.

FEBRUARY 3, 2003:

Forms Evolution with Ric Flair, Randy Orton, and Batista.

JULY 22, 2002:

After being brought over to Raw by new GM Eric Bischoff, turns on the returning Shawn Michaels.

OCTOBER 20, 2002:

Defeats Kane to unify World and Intercontinental titles at No Mercy.

MARCH 14, 2004:

Taps out to Chris Benoit at WrestleMania XX, losing World title in a three-way match that also included Shawn Michaels.





JUNE 13, 2004:

Ends feud with Shawn Michaels, defeating HBK in a Hell in a Cell match at Bad Blood.

JANUARY 9, 2005:

Defeats Randy Orton, Batista, Edge, Chris Jericho, and Chris Benoit in an Elimination Chamber match at New Year's Revolution to claim his 10th world title.

OCTOBER 3, 2005:

Turns on Ric Flair after a tag team win over Chris Masters and Carlito at WWE Homecoming.

AUGUST 15, 2004:

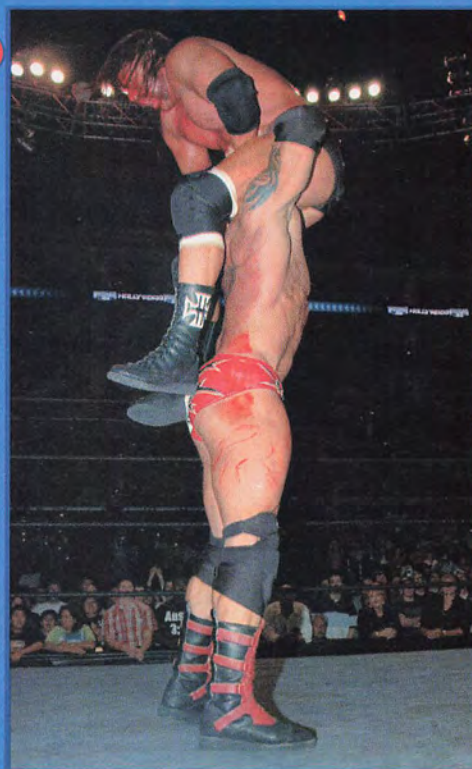
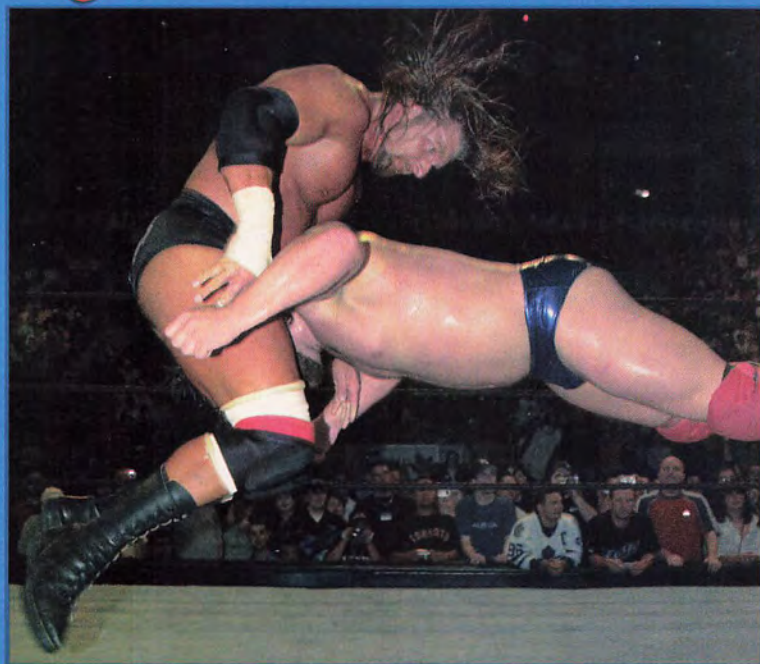
Soundly defeats Eugene at SummerSlam.

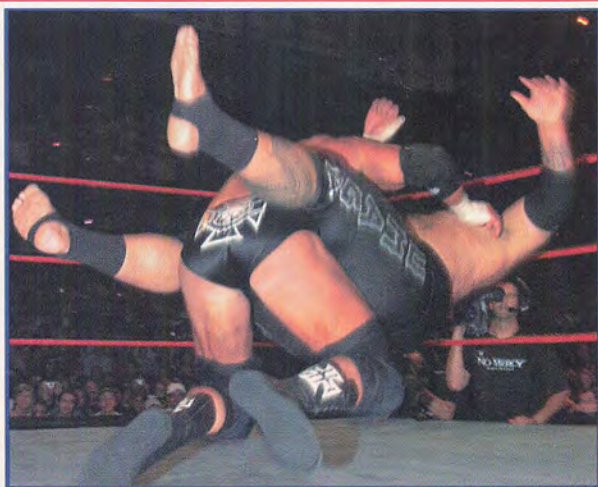
APRIL 3, 2005:

Lost WWE World title to Batista at WrestleMania 21.

NOVEMBER 27, 2005:

Defeats Flair in a Last Man Standing match at Survivor Series to end their feud.





APRIL 2, 2006:

Loses via submission to WWE champion John Cena in the main event of WrestleMania 22.

SEPTEMBER 17, 2006:

Teams with Michaels as D-X humiliates Vince and Shane McMahon and The Big Show in a handicapped Hell in a Cell match at Unforgiven.

OCTOBER 7, 2007:

Wins WWE championship from Randy Orton at No Mercy, but is forced to face Umaga and then Orton again in a Last Man Standing match; Orton prevails and takes the title in the rematch.

JUNE 12, 2006:

Reforms D-X with Shawn Michaels as the duo finds common enemies in the McMahon family and their henchmen, the Spirit Squad.

JANUARY 7, 2007:

Tears right quad in no-contest decision between D-X and Rated-RKO duo of Edge and Randy Orton.

MARCH 30, 2008:

Fails to reclaim title from Orton, who pins John Cena to retain in three-way match at WrestleMania XXIV.

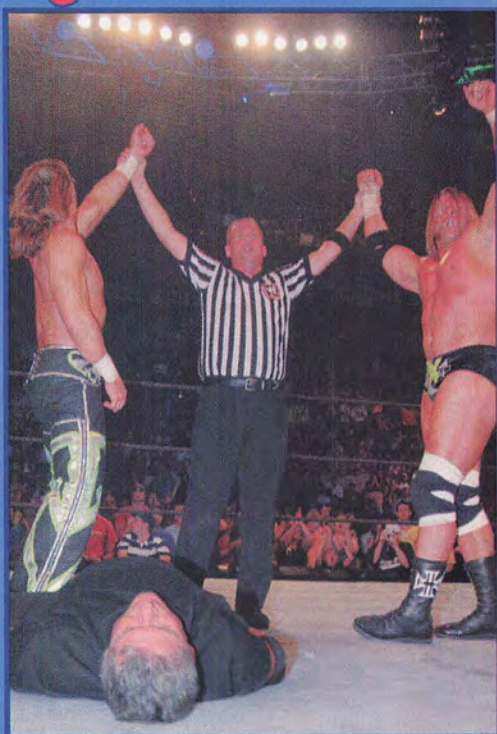




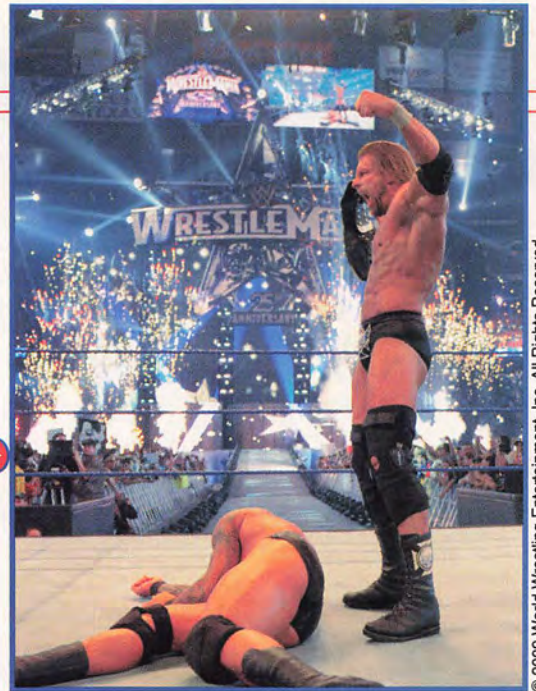
Photo by George Napolitano

APRIL 27, 2008:

Ties The Rock for most WWE championship wins with seven by defeating Randy Orton, John Cena, and JBL in a Four-Way Elimination match at Backlash.

FEBRUARY 15, 2009:

Sets record with eighth WWE title win by defeating Edge, Jeff Hardy, the Undertaker, Big Show, and Vladimir Kozlov in an Elimination Chamber match at No Way Out.



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APRIL 5, 2009:

Avenes the McMahons and retains his WWE Championship by pinning Orton in the main event at WrestleMania XXV.

JUNE 23, 2008:

Selected by Smackdown in the 2008 Draft, making the WWE title exclusive to the blue brand.

FEBRUARY 16, 2009:

Publicly admits his real-life marriage to Stephanie McMahon on *Raw*, and promises revenge against Randy Orton, Cody Rhodes, and Ted DiBiase for earlier attack against Stephanie and Shane McMahon.

APRIL 26, 2009:

After being drafted back to Raw, loses title to Orton in six-man tag match at Backlash and is taken out of the arena on a stretcher.

AUGUST 23, 2009:

Teams with Michaels in another D-X reunion to defeat Legacy at SummerSlam.



Photo by George Napolitano



Photo by George Napolitano

ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS

For period ended October 28, 2009

Championships highlighted in bold on the "Roll Call Of Champions" have changed hands since our previous issue. The information under the championship listing indicates the date that champion won the title, who the former champion was, and where the match took place.

ALL JAPAN UNIFIED TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TAIYO KEA & MINORU SUZUKI
(June 28, 2008; from Joe Doering & Keiji Muto; Osaka, Japan)

ALL JAPAN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KAZ HAYASHI
(February 6, 2009; from Naomichi Marufuji; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN CHAMPION: SATOSHI KOJIMA
(September 26, 2009; from Yoshihiro Takayama; Yokohama, Japan)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BAZOOKA JOE
(September 12, 2009; beat Chase Del Monte; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION MID-ATLANTIC CHAMPION: NICK LOGAN
(July 18, 2009; from Rob Eckos; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MATT & BRYAN LOGAN
(October 10, 2009; from the Arion Brothers; Newark, DE)

ECW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: CHRISTIAN
(September 1, 2007; from John Morrison; Cincinnati, OH)

FCW SOUTHERN CHAMPION: JUSTIN ANGEL
(September 24, 2009; from Heath Slater; Orlando, FL)

FCW FLORIDA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: BO & DUKE ROTUNDO
(July 23, 2009; from Justin Angel & Kris Logan; Tampa, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: DAVEY RICHARDS
(May 2, 2009; Tyler Black; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: ERICK STEVENS & RODERICK STRONG
(December 20, 2008; from Jason Blade & Kenny King; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO FLORIDA HERITAGE CHAMPION: BRAD ATTITUDE
(October 3, 2009; from Rhett Titus; Crystal River, FL)

IFW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: CHRIS STEELER
(February 21, 2009; from Kevin Knight; West Paterson, NJ)

IWGP HEAVEYWEIGHT CHAMPION: SHINSUKE NAKAMURA
(September 27, 2009; beat Togi Makabe to win the vacant title; Kobe, Japan)

IWGP INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: BROTHER RAY & BROTHER DEVON
(October 18, 2009; from Brutus Magnus & Doug Williams; Irvine, CA)

IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: MISTICO
(August 15, 2009; defeated Tiger Mask IV; Tokyo, Japan)

NWA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BLUE DEMON JR.
(October 25, 2008; from Adam Pearce; Mexico City, Mexico)

NWA JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: MIKE QUACKENBUSH
(May 11, 2007; from Tiger Mask IV; Portage, IN)

NWA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: RASCHE BROWN & KEITH WALKER
(October 4, 2008; from Phoenix Star & Zokre; Robstown, TX)

NWA WOMEN'S CHAMPION: MSCHIF
(April 27, 2008; from Amazing Kong; Cape Girardeau, MO)

OVW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: LOWRIDER
(July 18, 2009; from APOC; Louisville, KY)

OVW SOUTHERN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MOOSE & TILO
(September 27, 2009; from Benny the Producer & Andrew the Director; Louisville, KY)

OVW TV CHAMPION: VACANT
(September 16, 2009; Vacated due to repeated interference on Moose's behalf from Tilo and Taryn Shay; Louisville, KY)

OVW WOMEN'S CHAMPION: TEAM BLOSSOM
(October 7, 2008; from Epiphany; Louisville, KY)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA CHAMPION: VACANT
(September 4, 2008; vacated due to Bryan Danielson signing with WWE; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MATT & NICK JACKSON
(August 31, 2008; from Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HOONORED CROWN CHAMPION: GO SHIOZAKI
(June 14, 2009; from Takeshi Rikio; Fukuoka, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KENTA
(March 1, 2009; from Katsuhiko Nakajima; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: KENSUKE SASAKI & TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(September 21, 2009; from Akitoshi Saito & Bison Smith; Nagoya, Japan)

RING OF HONOR CHAMPIONS: AUSTIN ARIES
(June 13, 2009; from Jerry Lynn; New York, NY)

RING OF HONOR TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: DAVEY RICHARDS & EDDIE EDWARDS
(April 10, 2009; from Kevin Steen & El Generico; Philadelphia, PA)

SHIMMER CHAMPION: MSCHIF
(April 26, 2008; from Sara Del Rey; Berwyn, IL)

TNA KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION: ODB
(September 20, 2009; beat Cody Deane for the vacant title; Orlando, FL)

TNA KNOCKOUTS TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TAYLOR WILDE & SARITA
(September 20, 2009; beat Madison Rayne & Velvet Sky in the finals of the Knockouts tag team tournament; Orlando, FL)

TNA WORLD CHAMPION: A.J. STYLES
(September 20, 2009; defeated Kurt Angle, Matt Morgan, Sting, and Hernandez; Auburn Hills, MI)

TNA WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: BRUTUS MAGNUS & DOUG WILLIAMS
(October 18, 2009; beat Team 3-D, Beer Money Inc., and Scott Steiner & Booker T; Irvine, CA)

TNA X DIVISION CHAMPION: AMAZING RED
(October 5, 2009; defeated Samoa Joe; Orlando, FL)

WRESTLING SUPERSTARS LIVE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KEITH WALKER
(February 21, 2009; from Ricky Landell; Michigan City, IN)

WWE INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION: JOHN MORRISON
(September 1, 2009; from Rey Mysterio Jr.; Cleveland, OH)

WWE WORLD CHAMPION: THE UNDERTAKER
(October 4, 2009; from C.M. Punk; Newark, NJ)

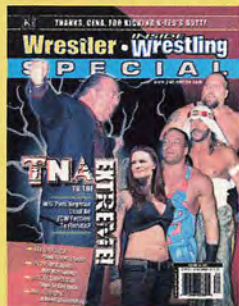
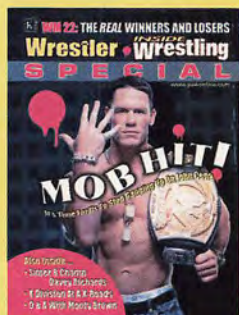
WWE UNIFIED TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: CHRIS JERICHO & THE BIG SHOW
(July 26, 2009; beat Carlito & Primo Colon; Philadelphia, PA)

WWE CHAMPION: JOHN CENA
(October 25, 2009; beat Randy Orton; Pittsburgh, PA)

WWE U.S. CHAMPION: THE MIZ
(October 5, 2009; from Kofi Kingston; Wilkes-Barre, PA)

WWE WOMAN'S CHAMPION: MICHELLE MCCOOL
(June 28, 2009; defeated Melina; Sacramento, CA)

WWE DIVAS CHAMPION: MELINA
(October 12, 2009; defeated Jillian Hall; Indianapolis, IN)



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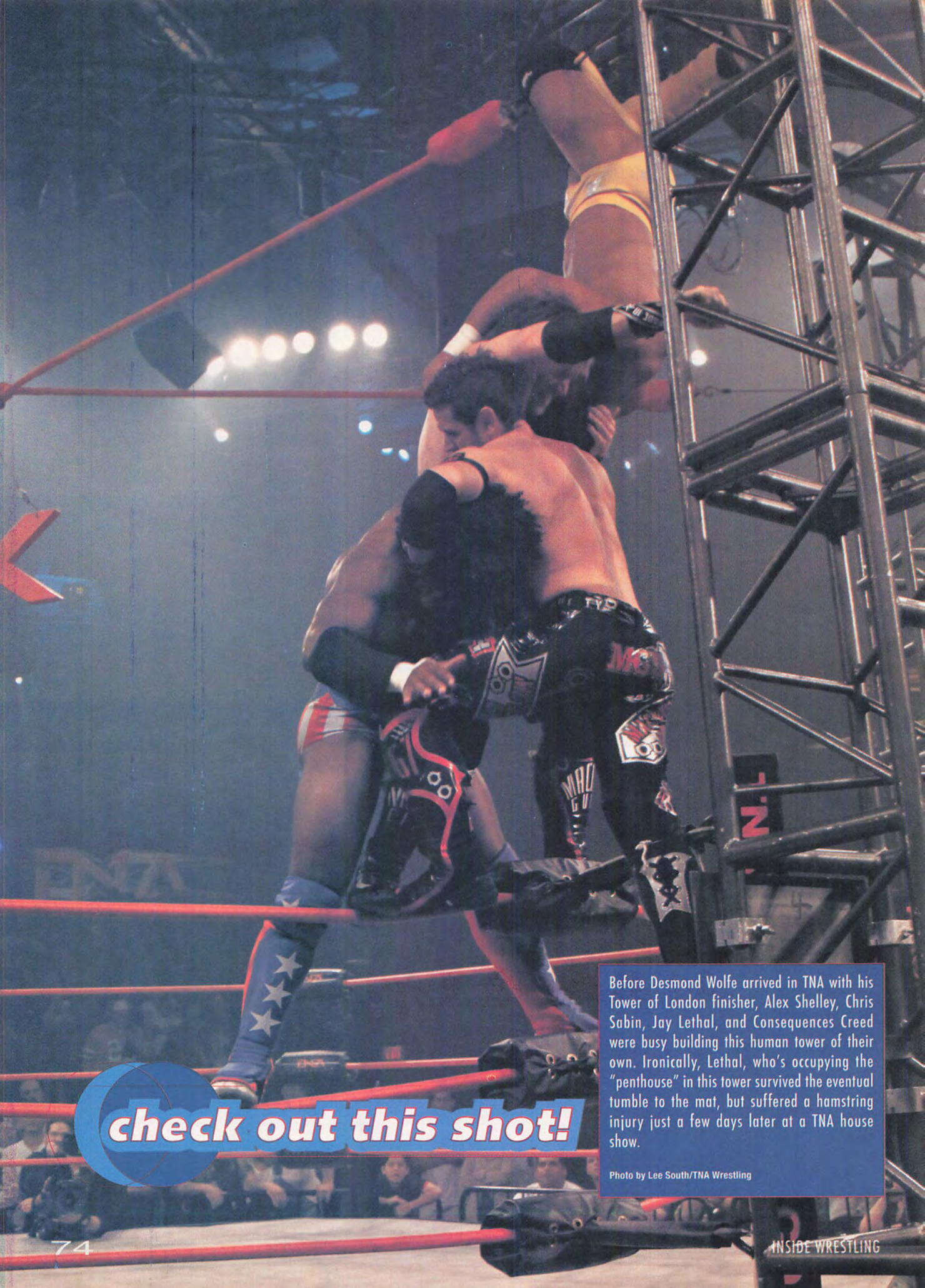
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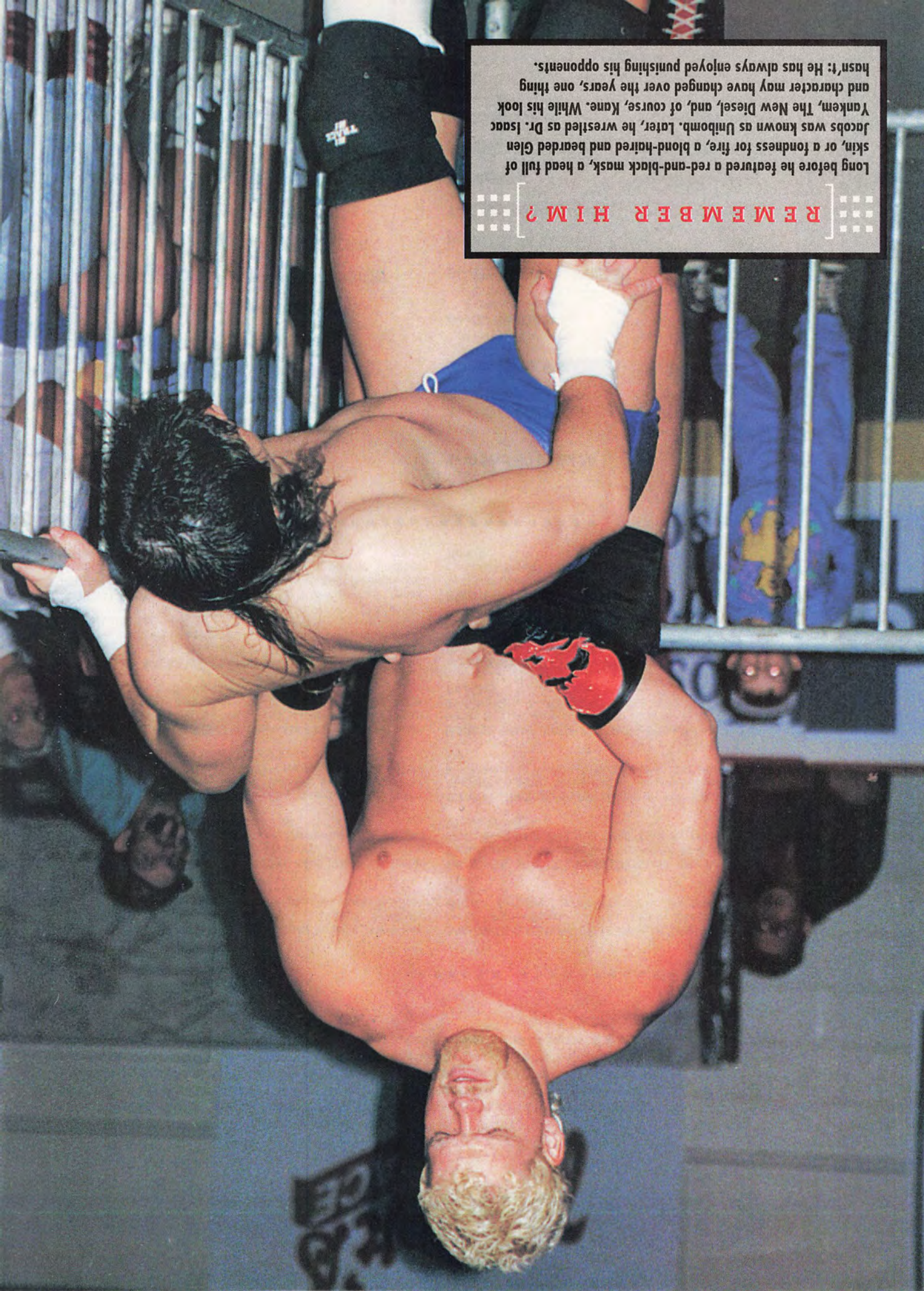
check out this shot!

Before Desmond Wolfe arrived in TNA with his Tower of London finisher, Alex Shelley, Chris Sabin, Jay Lethal, and Consequences Creed were busy building this human tower of their own. Ironically, Lethal, who's occupying the "penthouse" in this tower survived the eventual tumble to the mat, but suffered a hamstring injury just a few days later at a TNA house show.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Long before he featured a red-and-black mask, a head full of skin, or a fondness for fire, a blond-haired and bearded Glen Jacobs was known as Unibomb. Later, he wrestled as Dr. Isaac Yankem, The New Diesel, and, of course, Kane. While his look and character may have changed over the years, one thing hasn't: He has always enjoyed punishing his opponents.

REMEMBER HIM?



Top 10 and tag team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain title-holders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (—) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue. Note: In an effort to keep the ratings as up-to-date as possible, these pages are often the last to be sent to the printer. Thus, the ratings may reflect changes not reflected in the remainder of the issue.

FOR PERIOD ENDED NOVEMBER 3, 2009

COMBAT ZONE WRESTLING: Champion—Drake Younger; 1—B. Boy; 2—Drew Blood; 3—Greg Excellent; 4—T.J. Cannon; 5—Bruce Maxwell; 6—Devon Moore; 7—Jon Moxley; 8—Nick Gage; 9—Samir Callihan; 10—Danny Havoc.

EXODUS WRESTLING ALLIANCE: Champion—Ivan Koloff; 1—George South; 2—George South Jr.; 3—Ricky Steamboat Jr.; 4—Reid Flair; 5—Jake Manning; 6—Bobo Jr.; 7—Cruel Connection 2; 8—Charlie Dreamer; 9—Shaun Van Halen; 10—Jimmy Jack.

GROUND ZERO WRESTLING: Champion—The Pharaoh; 1—Phil Brown; 2—Martin Stanley; 3—Mitch A. Palooza; 4—Eddie Diamond; 5—Shorty Smalls; 6—Rev. J. Boogie; 7—Deacon Strickland; 8—Kevin Daniels; 9—Gordon Braswell; 10—Peter Spade.

HIGH VOLTAGE WRESTLING MIDWEST: Champion—Kahagas; 1—Donovan Rudick; 2—Mark Sterling; 3—Mike Sydal; 4—Mississippi Madman; 5—Eric Allen; 6—Jeremy Wyatt; 7—Brandon Aaron; 8—Cabal; 9—Alexander Rudolph; 10—Brandon Espinosa.

MID-SOUTH PRO WRESTLING: Champion—Tim Storm; 1—Matt Riviera; 2—Apoc; 3—Jeff Jet; 4—Prince Al Farat; 5—Dexter Hardaway; 6—Mark Johnson; 7—Bruiser Rick Sweetan; 8—Wes Robinson; 9—Dustin Anderson; 10—Chas Cardington.

NORTHEAST WRESTLING: Champion—Jason Blade; 1—Paul London; 2—Mr. Ken Anderson; 3—Brian Anthony; 4—Jerry Lawler; 5—Rob Eckos; 6—Jaili Salalam; 7—Jim Neidhart; 8—Matt Taven; 9—Ron Simmons; 10—Ricky Steamboat Jr.

RING OF HONOR

Champion:
1—**TYLER BLACK** (c) 202, Milwaukee, WI
2—**RODERICK STRONG** (2) 212, Tampa, FL
3—**JERRY LYNN** (3) 185, Minneapolis, MN
4—**CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI** (4) 240, Schaffhausen, Switz
5—**BRYAN DANIELSON** (5) 185, Aberdeen, WA
6—**COLT CABANA** (6) 233, Chicago, IL
7—**KENNY OMEGA** (7) 200, Waikiki, HI
8—**SONJAY DUTT** (8) 180, Bombay, India
9—**DELIRIOUS** (9) 194, Edge of Sanity
10—**DAVEY RICHARDS** (10) 205, Othello, WA

NWA

Champion:
1—**ADAM PEARCE** (c) 228, Mexico City, Mexico
2—**OLIVER JOHN** (1) 248, San Diego, CA
3—**APOLLO** (2) 228, Sacramento, CA
4—**SCOTTY MAC** (3) 265, Ponce, Puerto Rico
5—**BRENT ALBRIGHT** (4) 205, Kelowna, B.C.
6—**PHIL SHATTER** (5) 236, Tulsa, OK
7—**RICK FULLER** (6) 247, Paris Island, SC
8—**MANABU NAKAMISHI** (7) 325, Middleboro, MA
9—**EL DANDY** (8) 186, Kyoto, Japan
10—**MUSCLE GANG** (9) 200, Tijuana, Mexico
(10) 297, San Diego, CA

JAPAN

1—**TOSHIAKI KAWADA** (—) 250, Asakaga, Japan
2—**SATOSHI KOJIMA** (—) 247, Tokyo, Japan
3—**SHINSUKE NAKAMURA** (3) 245, Kyoto, Japan
4—**GO SHIOZAKI** (4) 220, Kumamoto, Japan
5—**YOSHINOBU KANEMARU** (5) 242, Kofu City, Japan
6—**KENSUKE SASAKE** (—) 242, Tokyo, Japan
7—**TAKEISHI MORISHIMA** (—) 320, Tokyo, Japan
8—**MISTICO** (—) 165, Mexico City, Mexico
9—**MASATO TANAKA** (—) 216, Wakayama, Japan
10—**KAZ HAYASHI** (—) 190, Tokyo, Japan

MEXICO

1—**DR. WAGNER JR.** (1) 216, Toluca, Mexico
2—**MISTICO** (2) 165, Mexico City, Mexico
3—**MESIAS** (3) 245, Bayamon, Puerto Rico
4—**HECTOR GARZA** (—) 209, Monterrey, Mexico
5—**CIBERNETICO** (5) 234, Aguascalientes, Mexico
6—**ULTIMO GUERRERO** (4) 210, Gomez Palacio, Mexico
7—**LA PARKA JR.** (—) 216, Hermosillo, Mexico
8—**NEGRO CASAS** (6) 185, Mexico City, Mexico
9—**ELECTROSHOCK** (—) 209, Toluca, Mexico
10—**ATLANTS** (—) 202, Los Altos, Mexico

OFFICIAL RATING S

- TOP 10**
- 1 THE UNDERTAKER**
299, Death Valley, CA
 - 2 A.J. STYLES**
(-) WWE World champion
240, West Newbury, MA
 - 3 JOHN CENA**
(-) TNA World champion
215, Gainesville, GA
 - 4 CHRISTIAN**
(9) WWE heavyweight champion
235, Toronto, Ontario
 - 5 AUSTIN ARIES**
(4) ECW champion
202, Milwaukee, WI
 - 6 BLUE DEMON JR.**
(5) Ring of Honor champion
228, Mexico City, Mexico
 - 7 TOSHIKI KAWADA**
(6) NWA champion
250, Ashikaga, Japan
 - 8 RANDY ORTON**
(-) ZERO-1 heavyweight champion
245, St. Louis, Mo
 - 9 C.M. PUNK**
(2) No. 1 contender WWE heavyweight title
222, Chicago, IL
 - 10 STING**
(-) No. 1 contender TNA World title
255, Venice Beach, CA



A.J. Styles

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

- TAG TEAMS**
- 1 BRUTUS MAGNUS & DOUG WILLIAMS**
Combined weight: 475 pounds
(9) TNA World tag team champions
 - 2 CHRIS JERICHO & THE BIG SHOW**
Combined weight: 667 pounds
(1) WWE Unified tag team champions
 - 3 DAVEY RICHARDS & EDDIE EDWARDS**
(5) ROH tag team champions
Combined weight: 395 pounds
 - 4 RASCHIE BROWN & KEITH WALKER**
(4) NWA tag team champions
Combined weight: 560 pounds
 - 5 BO & DUKE ROTUNDO**
(7) WWA tag team champions
Combined weight: 536 pounds
 - 6 BROTHER DEVON & BROTHER RAY**
(8) FCW tag team champions
Combined weight: 560 pounds
 - 7 TED DIBLASE JR. & CODY RHODES**
(10) IWGP tag team title
Combined weight: 454 pounds
 - 8 KENSUKE SASAKI & TAKESHI MORISHIMA**
(4) No. 1 contender WWE Unified tag title
Combined weight: 563 pounds
 - 9 ROBERT ROODE & JAMES STORM**
(-) Pro Wrestling NOAH tag team champions
Combined weight: 495 pounds
 - 10 CHRIS SABIN & ALEX SHELLEY**
(-) No. 1 contender TNA World tag title
Combined weight: 410 pounds

- RAW**
- 1 RANDY ORTON**
(1) 240, West Newbury, MA
 - 2 TRIPLE-H**
(2) 245, St. Louis, MO
 - 3 THE MIZ**
(2) 255, Greenwich, CT
 - 4 KOFI KINGSTON**
(6) 231, Cleveland, OH
 - 5 SHAWN MICHAELS**
(3) 221, Ghana, W. Africa
 - 6 EVAN BOURNE**
(8) 226, San Antonio, TX
 - 7 JACK SWAGGER**
(7) 183, St. Louis, MO
 - 8 M.V.P.**
(5) 285, Perry, OK
 - 9 TED DIBLASE JR.**
(4) 245, Miami, FL
 - 10 CODY RHODES**
(9) 235, Palm Springs, FL

- SMACKDOWN**
- 1 C.M. PUNK**
(-) 299, Death Valley, CA
 - 2 JOHN MORRISON**
(2) 222, Chicago, IL
 - 3 REY MISTERIO JR.**
(5) 219, Los Angeles, CA
 - 4 DOLPH ZIGGLER**
(4) 175, San Diego, CA
 - 5 CHRIS JERICHO**
(6) 221, Hollywood, CA
 - 6 FINLAY**
(3) 226, Manchester, NY
 - 7 MIKE KNOX**
(-) 233, Belfast, N. Ireland
 - 8 R-TRUTH**
(-) 293, Phoenix, AZ
 - 9 DREW MCINTYRE**
(8) 228, Charlotte, NC
 - 10 KANE**
(-) 323, Hell

- ECW**
- 1 YOSHI TATSU**
(1) 235, Toronto, Ontario
 - 2 ZACK RYDER**
(10) 230, Gifu, Japan
 - 3 EZEKIEL JACKSON**
(8) 214, Glen Cove, NY
 - 4 VLADIMIR KOZLOV**
(3) 285, Harlem, NY
 - 5 SHEAMUS**
(2) 302, Moscow, Russia
 - 6 SHELTON BENJAMIN**
(5) 280, Dublin, Ireland
 - 7 WILLIAM REGAL**
(6) 248, Orangeburg, SC
 - 8 TOMMY DREAMER**
(1) 240, Blackpool, England
 - 9 PAUL BURNHILL**
(-) 247, Chelsea, England
 - 10 HURRICANE HELMS**
(9) 215, Raleigh, NC

- TNA**
- 1 STING**
(-) 215, Gainesville, GA
 - 2 KURT ANGLE**
(3) 255, Venice Beach, CA
 - 3 MATT MORGAN**
(2) 233, Pittsburgh, PA
 - 4 AMAZING RED**
(1) 330, Fairfield, CT
 - 5 HERNANDEZ**
(-) 147, Brooklyn, NY
 - 6 ERIC YOUNG**
(5) 285, Houston, TX
 - 7 DANIELS**
(-) 225, Vancouver, B.C.
 - 8 KEVIN NASH**
(7) 224, Los Angeles, CA
 - 9 HOMICIDE**
(4) 335, Detroit, MI
 - 10 SAMOA JOE**
(2) 280, Los Angeles, CA

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① Daniels enjoys the support of the fans, and not just because of his brilliant in-ring skills. He also gives back by staying after shows to sign autographs.



Photo by Vern Verna

⑤ Men like the behemoth Rob Terry enjoy a distinct size and power advantage over Daniels, but the wily veteran knows when to trade blows and when to avoid brawling.



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

THE ANALYSIS

REPERTOIRE: Very few professional wrestlers alive today, or of any era, boast an arsenal as varied and effective as Daniels. From lucha libre to the Japanese strong style to the acrobatic athleticism of the X division, Daniels has the ability to adapt his style to any in-ring situation. Though he may never be considered a physical powerhouse, he has the experience and wherewithal to go toe-to-toe with any man in the business.

STRENGTHS: One look at Daniels' list of accomplishments and title reigns tells the story: Daniels can square off against anyone, anywhere, with any stipulations, and still emerge the victor. His experience and versatility, which allows him to adjust his game plan depending on the situation, is Daniels' greatest strength. Whether wrestling as The Fallen Angel, Curry Man, or just plain Daniels, this guy knows how to get the job done.

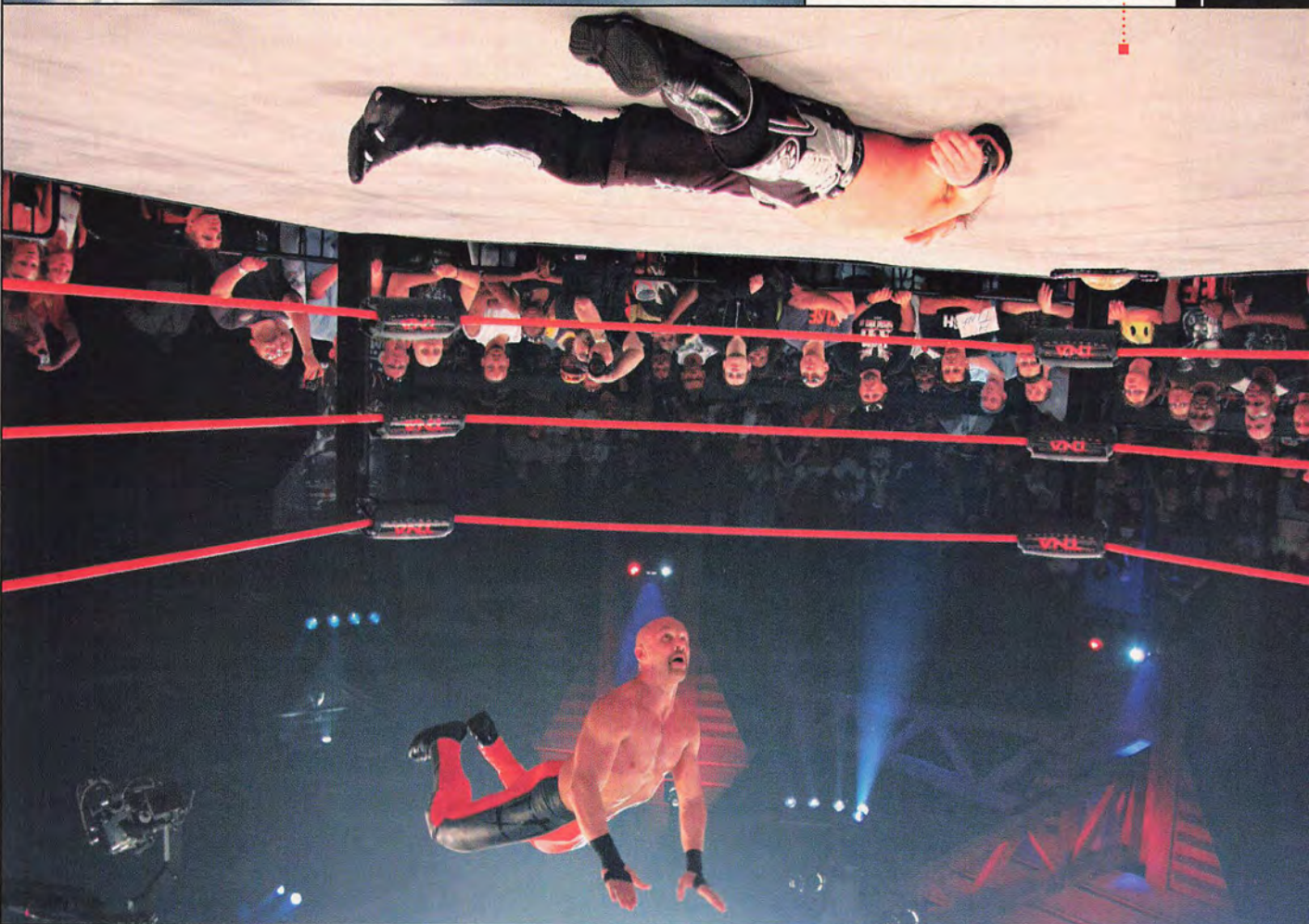
WEAKNESSES: Daniels' physical stature, though ideally suited for TNA's X division and the independent circuit, is on the small side in the milieu of pro wrestling. His stints in WWE and WCW were disappointingly brief, partly due to bad luck, but also likely because of his smaller frame. In a profession where "bigger" is often equated with "better" (erroneously, in many cases), a man of Daniels' size faces some uphill battles.

DEFINING CAREER MOMENT: On March 13, 2005, at the Destination X pay-per-view, Daniels won a grueling since Styles actually retrieved the belt first, only to have it yanked away by Daniels just as the knocked-out referee regained consciousness. Tainted or not, the victory began an unprecedented 150-day title reign for Daniels, during which he exemplified the excitement and innovation of the X division.

FUTURE: Despite creeping closer to 40, the age at which many wrestlers consider hanging up the boots, Daniels still has the energy and passion of a man in his early-20s. He's showing no signs of slowing down, and continues to reinvent himself. Although his resume of wrestling accomplishments is impressive, it's missing something—a reign as TNA World champion. Stiff competition and tough odds stand between Daniels and this goal, but that has never stopped him before.

③ Though he's willing to take the risks necessary to compete in TNA's X division, Daniels' mat wrestling and striking ability shouldn't be overlooked.

② After his experience, Daniels' greatest asset is his aerial ability, which often leaves fans and foes mesmerized.



THE NUMBERS

OFFENSE (9.5): Most contemporary wrestlers have one not-so-secret weapon—a brutal signature move—to unleash on a dazed opponent. Daniels has an entire arsenal of finishers. Whether he hits an opponent with the BME (Best Moonsuit Ever), the bridging Northern Lights suplex, The Angels' Wings, The Last Rites, or Curry Man's Spice Rack, the end result is invariably the same: a three-count. Daniels can launch an assault from any angle, at any speed. He can defy physics by attacking on the mat, from the top rope, or dangling from the crossed cables of the Ultimate X.

DEFENSE (8.5): Because Daniels prefers to be on the attack, he sometimes finds himself indefensibly open to counter-attack. His propensity for high-risk tactics can backfire, leaving him disadvantaged. His little physique and impeccable ring savvy come in handy when he finds himself on the wrong end of a beatdown, though. As quickly as he gets himself into trouble, he can get himself out.

EXPERIENCE (9.5): Judging by his enviable athletic physique and seemingly endless supply of stamina, you'd never guess that Daniels is 38 years old. But when you look at his past accomplishments, you realize that Daniels is a ring veteran who, despite not having worn gold in WWE, has done practically everything else a wrestler could yearn for. Few wrestlers can boast such an extensive list of promotions and titles on their resumes. Daniels has found success all over North America, including short stints in the WWF and WCW, has honed his craft in Japan, and is among the foundational talents to help put Ring of Honor and TNA on the map.

CONDITIONING (9.0): It has been said that pro wrestling is equal parts grace and violence. If that is so, Daniels is wrestling's equivalent of Baryshnikov. His movements in the ring are crisp, accurate, and effective, without any wasted effort. His physique is like that of a sleek jungle cat. For a wrestler of his longevity, having absorbed brutal punishment for so many years, he is still remarkably quick, agile, and nearly flawless in execution.

STAMINA (9.5): Some wrestlers can be considered sprinters (high-flyers who attack with speed and the element of surprise), while others are marathoners (tacticians who systematically dismantle opponents). Daniels is a bit of both. Though he is perhaps best known for lightning-quick battles in TNA's X division, he has proven that he can go the distance, as he did in an hour-long Iron Man match against Spanky, Doug Williams, and Low Ki in ROH.

① Daniels has proven many times over that he knows how to win. Defeating a skilled opponent of A.J. Styles' stature is a testament to Daniels' game.

SCIENCE (9.5): Daniels has a brilliant mind for wrestling and the physical attributes necessary to bring his game plan to fruition. Though he specializes in fast-paced chain wrestling and aerial assaults, he has the ring smarts to win a match by any means necessary. Few wrestlers in the world execute their matches with such precision.

POWER (7.5): There's no disputing Daniels is an impressive physical specimen with good genetics, but he is still a relatively small man in a world of giants. Rarely the biggest dog in the fight, Daniels has always utilized speed, momentum, and an uncanny ring sense to make up for his relatively slight build. Daniels' power resides in his tendon strength and use of angles, leverage, and acceleration.

SPEED (9.0): Speed is only beneficial to a wrestler if he knows how to use it, which Daniels does. He uses his speed like a cobra, waiting for the perfect time to strike. Unlike some peers in his weight class, Daniels is not interested in unleashing a volley of so-called high spots just for the sake of wow-ing a crowd. Daniels is never sluggish, but waits for precisely the right moment to explode.

ABILITY TO ABSORB PUNISHMENT (8.5): You don't last in professional wrestling as long as Daniels has without learning how to work hurt or how to soldier through the next match. Though Daniels wouldn't be classified as a "hardcore" performer, he has seen his share of bloody battles, from the death-defying Ultimate X matches to the vicious Six Sides of Steel battles.

QUALITY OF OPPOSITION (8.5): Daniels is at his best when he's up against opposition similar to him: fast, technically proficient, and ring-savvy. His battles in the X division are among the most grueling and exciting in the sport. But one wonders how he would fare against much larger, stronger opponents, like Lashley or Abyss, if he had to face them on a consistent basis.

Photo by Vern Verna



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



DANIELS

Years Pro: 16

Size: 6', 224 lbs.

"PWI 500" Listings: 2009: 58

2008: 95 (as Curry Man)

2007: 30

2006: 15

2005: 17

2004: 25

2003: 20

2002: 57

2001: 65

2000: 76

1999: 114

APW Worldwide Internet (1 time)

King of the Indies (2000)

ECWA heavyweight (2 times)

EWF heavyweight

FWA British heavyweight

Michinoku Pro British Commonwealth

junior heavyweight

Futuritabi tag team league (2002 MCW

tag team)

IWGP junior heavyweight tag team

NWA Florida heavyweight

NWA Midwest tag team

PWF United States

3PW heavyweight

Zero1-Max United States openweight

ROH tag team (2 times)

TNA-NWA tag team (6 times)

TNA X division (3 times)

UPW heavyweight (2 times)

WCPW league

WCPW lightweight

WCPW middleweight

WCPW tag team (2 times)

WWC tag team

Tag Team of the Year (2006)

Match of the Year (2006)

PWI Awards:

Titles:

THE WRESTLING ANALYST



In the end, Sting's effort paid off. At No Surrender, Styles took home the TNA World title. In payment for Sting's help, Styles offered Sting a shot at the World title at Bound For Glory.

"I think A.J. is gonna be all right," said Sting, shortly after their videotape session. "Our paths are going to cross in the future, but I'm actually looking forward to it. Giving up that torch and passing it to someone else will be the next challenge that I have to face. But is the time right? Yes. Is Styles the right athlete and the right human being to receive that torch? I definitely think so. I want A.J. to hang in there because 'The Stinger' won't be around to hold TNA together forever."

The icon chuckled at that remark, probably aware that Styles would benefit from his assistance at No Surrender. But he probably had no idea that Styles would grab the torch on his own at Bound for Glory.

Sting hasn't decided whether his loss to Styles at Bound for Glory will be his final match. He may have to summon a special kind of courage in the coming months. Perhaps he will show A.J. that it's not always about showing up. Sometimes it really is about when to walk away.

□



While in the viewing room, Sting showed Styles his example of overcoming adversity to reach the top. A.J. listened attentively as Sting talked about all he had to go through to become the NWA World champ.

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Ingiosi On MEM: "No doubt it will be the collective egos of this group that eventually tear it apart from the inside. Still, we should enjoy the ride while we're on it. This should be the golden age of TNA. If this group were in WWE, it would be considered one of the 'greatest in wrestling history.' Yet, while it is the main angle of *Impact*, it still doesn't feel as if the Main Event Mafia has grabbed its rightful place in wrestling history just yet."

Ingiosi On Vladimir Kozlov: "The involvement of Vladimir Kozlov—or, as we'll call him, 'Russian Khali'—following the match sort of doused the excitement. Of course, we understand that part of the Smackdown main event picture. And, yes, it makes sense to introduce him right away, especially as a part of such a big night. But, still ... why? Seriously, why? The man uses a head-butt for God's sake. We don't get it but, hey, we're not Freddy Prince Jr."

Ingiosi On Paul Burchill: "Wow, Burchill went from goofy pirate, to OVW, to creepy sister-lover, to mid-card guy who used to be a pirate and creepy sister-lover in no time flat. Plus, making your debut during the down week of ECW is like getting traded from the Kansas City Royals to the Japanese equivalent of the Kansas City Royals, and no one notices."

Ingiosi On The Michaels-Jericho Feud: "While watching both sure-fire Hall of Famers spew hatred toward each other on Monday night, I couldn't help but wonder: *Just how good will this be when all is said and done? We are being treated to two of professional wrestling's greatest showmen and talkers going head-to-head in a series of thinly veiled personal attacks on each other. The seeds of the feud were planted months ago and, unlike most of what WWE puts on television, they were allowed to take root and grow.*"

**“THE TURN”
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INGIOSI
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15 months of soul-searching in the rafters made him hotter than ever.

Sting replayed his match against Flair on the final edition of *Monday Nitro*. Even A.J. winced. Then Sting played his comeback match for TNA in which he teamed with Christian Cage against Jeff Jarrett and Monty Brown in January 2006. Chants of "You still got it" reverberated throughout the Impact Zone. Sting and A.J. also watched Sting's NWA World title victory over Jarrett at Bound for Glory that same year.

"There were plenty of times I thought about quitting, especially after WCW folded, but it even crossed my mind in my prime. I learned you've got to have a few valleys so you can reach the peaks, A.J. If you lost any matches, the fans would lose interest pretty quickly. More importantly, you wouldn't know what you're made of ... right?"

Styles nodded in affirmation. Sting had succeeded in getting his point across. "The irony is now that retirement is staring me in the face, I don't want to leave." He understood Sting. He understood himself better. He understood it wasn't all about winning. It was about showing up.

15 months of soul-searching in the rafters made him hotter than ever.

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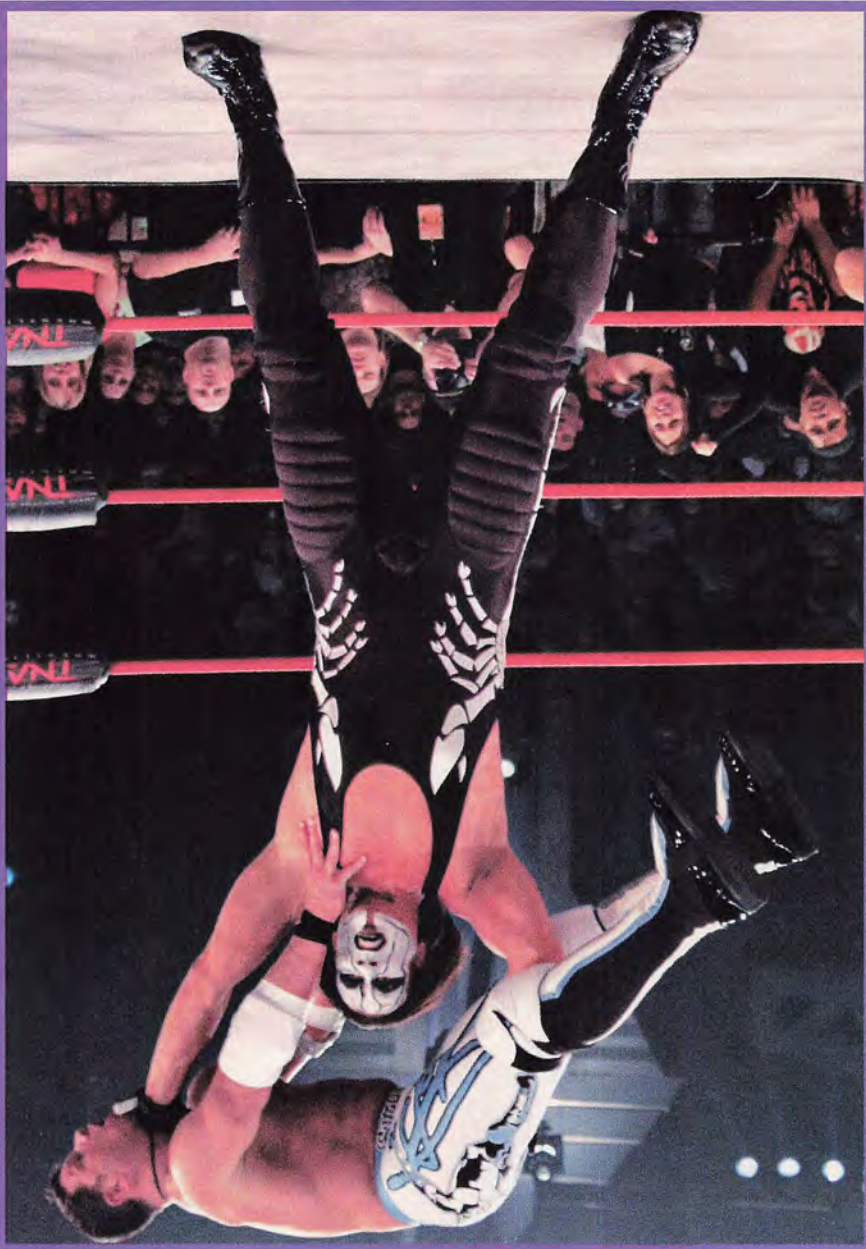


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

WHAT WOULD A.J. DO WITHOUT A.J. WRESTLING?

A.J. Styles has finally achieved a

comfortable lifestyle after years of meager payoffs. But, at this stage of his career, Styles hasn't earned so much money that he can retire in luxury. What does a former world champion do after wrestling? In A.J.'s case, we came up with a few ideas:

WATER SALESMAN. Actually, Styles

delivered water from door to door before signing a contract with the fledgling TNA in 2002. He turned down developmental offers from WCW and the WWF so his wife could continue her college education. Hey, at least A.J. would have practical work experience!

COMIC ACTOR. Styles proved he had

the acting chops when he was involved in an on-camera tryst with Karen Angle. We never knew Styles could act so dumb! While the crown-wearing "Prince Of Phenomenal" was a bomb with most fans, it proved Styles was capable of a wider range. There has to be room for him on *Mad TV*!

Could have taught the youth of TNA, rather than beaten them.

VIDEO GAME ENTREPRENEUR. We're not

talking about Stevie Richards' crackpot notion of opening an arcade back in the mid-'90s. Styles has appeared in commercials for TNA's line of video games, and he—along with nearly all the X division and Booker T—are avid gamers, backstage at the Impact Zone. He would definitely have passion for it.

YOUTH PASTOR. Styles is proud to be a devout Christian. He has said that

God comes first, his family comes second, and wrestling a distant third. We could envision Styles sharing the Word with groups of teenagers on hiking, biking, and whitewater rafting trips. He would be a charismatic inspiration.

HEAD TRAINER. TNA still doesn't have an adequate training school in

place. Patient, disciplined, and extremely giving, Styles would be the perfect head trainer. He could stay in the business while maintaining a normal life. Come on, he'd have to be a better teacher than Rhino!

—Harry Burkett



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

were going up against *WrestleMania IV*, no less. I thought my career was gonna end right there, and sink like a stone against someone with Flair's stature. But I gave it all I had. Instead of sinking my career, it saved it."

Styles knew what Sting was doing. Yet he wasn't annoyed by his host's pep talk. He wanted to

hear more.

"Here's another

one," Sting said. "I

was red-hot coming

off my feud with The

Great Muta, really

proving myself against

an international star.

Then I ruptured my

patella. Part of me

didn't want to risk in-

jurming myself further

and becoming a cripple.

I was thinking about

opening a gym, getting

out completely. On top of

that, I was kicked out of

The Four Horsemen, and

Lex Luger got my World

title shot against Flair at

WrestleWar. Then the

Horsemen attacked me at

the next pay-per-view. And

I was saved by Robocop

... Does it get any lower

than that?"

Styles smiled awkwardly at Sting's joke. Nearly 20 years

later, Styles felt embarrassed for poor

Sting. "Not to worry, though, because

I had this gem of a match against Flair

in Baltimore," noted Sting, as he popped

in a VHS tape. It was Sting's NWA World

title victory over Flair at the 1990 Great

American Bash in Baltimore—his greatest

win ever. For the next 16 minutes, A.J.

watched the match in awe.

There was more. Sting showed Styles

his awful "Spin The Wheel, Make The Deal"

match against Jake Roberts at 1992's

Halloween Havoc. He juxtaposed that

against his victory over Big Van Vader in

the final of the King of Cable tournament at

Starrcade two months later. He reminded

Styles how the New World Order's invasion

of WCW had severely diminished his star-

power. He thought about quitting while he

was close to the top. But it turned out that

"If it weren't for Sting, I might not be sure know that I wouldn't be TNA World champion. I owe everything to him. Even *that* stuck in my craw for a little bit. But then, just like before, I realized my ego was getting in the way. Sting made me realize that pride can get you in trouble. Integrity is much more important than pride."

During a September episode of *Impact*, Styles was about to announce he was stepping away from the sport. But Sting interrupted Styles' farewell promo. He gave Styles a tough-love pep talk. It was the spark Styles needed to go forward with a five-way TNA World title match at No Surrender that also involved Sting, Hernandez, Morgan, and defending champ

As historic as that victory was, Styles believes his true breakthrough occurred on a quiet Wednesday afternoon in September when Sting invited him to his home in California. The get-together took place between Styles' aborted retirement announcement and his title victory at No Surrender. Sting treated Styles to a simple

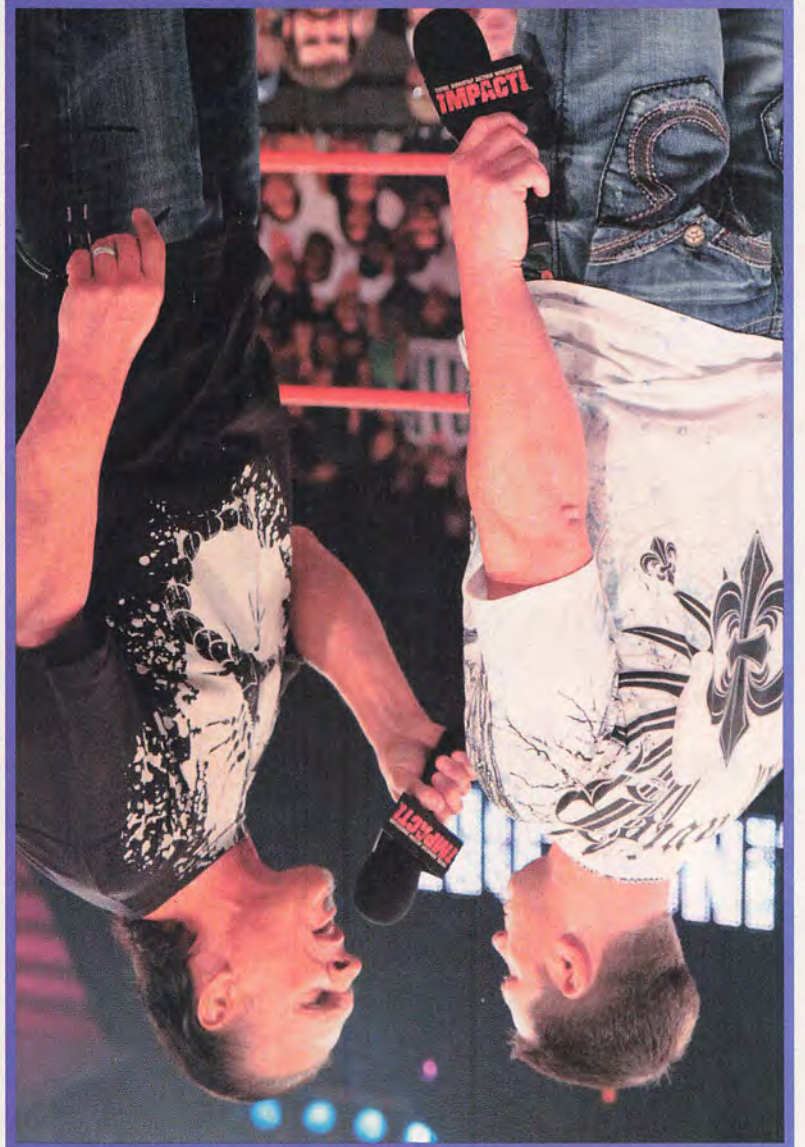
And Styles pinned Sting cleanly to retain the championship.

did Styles.

fourth year. Sting brought his A-game. So premier pay-per-view for an unprecedented offering him a World title shot at TNA's

Sting selected a few of his greatest matches. He started with his famous 45-minute draw against NWA World champion Ric Flair at the inaugural Clash of the Champions in 1988. "I was just a young kid trying to hang on to my job," Sting told A.J. "I had built my career working for Bill Watts, and he sold the UWF to Jim Crockett. I had to prove my worth all over again. I felt I had no career direction. I was thinking about coming back to California. Then, out of nowhere, I was offered this match against Flair, and we

Sting wanted to make it very clear to Styles that he knew the "Phenomenal One" was better than to walk away while still in his prime (above). After a long talk in front of the fans in attendance at the TNA Impact Zone, Styles finally broke down (right) and listened to reason.



Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

lunch and served up a bowl of popcorn to enjoy a few hours of wrestling videos. It turns out that Sting wanted to do more than entertain his guest. He wanted to motivate him.

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A.J. STYLES

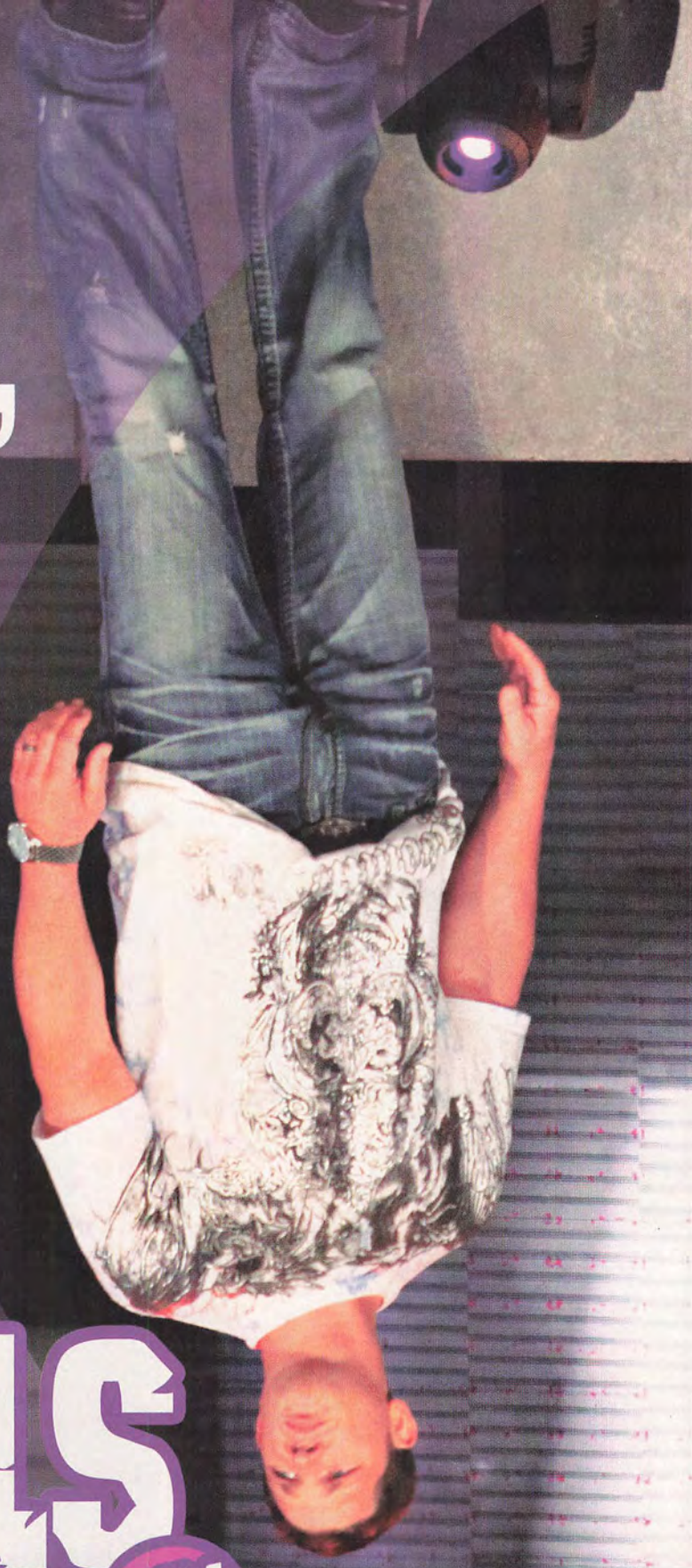
TNA WORLD CHAMPION

The Untold Story Of How
Sting Saved His Career

STING NEEDED TO GIVE A.J.
STYLES MORE THAN A PEP
TALK WHEN THE "PHENOMENAL
ONE" CONSIDERED LEAVING
THE BUSINESS LAST SUMMER.
"THE STINGER" PROVED HIS OWN
CAREER WAS A LESSON IN HUMILITY
AND PERSEVERANCE

BY HARRY BURKETT

“I WAS SO down on myself that I couldn't look at anyone anymore. Sometimes, we become so self-important and self-absorbed that we think people are judging us all the time. I'd lost the Legends title to Kevin Nash on pay-per-view and lost two matches to Matt Morgan on TV. I realized that was the real shame.”
A.J. Styles' eyes darted to the floor. What he considered a career low point occurred in August, only one month before he achieved his greatest triumph: winning his first TNA World title. Only now does Styles realize what a terrible mistake he almost made.







It was Albano's forays into mainstream media that truly helped launch both his career and the legitimacy of the Rock 'n' Wrestling era. Whether it was starting as Mario on *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show* (above) or appearing with Cyndi Lauper (top), Capt. Lou made an impression wherever he went.

plus-year reign as WWF champion. Years later, Albano's comical feud with singer Cyndi Lauper helped launch the Rock 'n' Wrestling era, changing the business forever.

Appearing in Lauper's music videos helped the devilish Albano morph into a fan favorite. This led to work in movies and television, including roles on *Miami Vice* and *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show*. His best acting role, though, was as Frank the Fixer in the 1986 mafia comedy, *Wise Guys*. "What a casting coup he represents," wrote the late Chicago film critic Gene Siskel. "Lou Albano as Frank the Fixer is a walking time bomb." Roger Ebert called Albano's work, "Fearsome ... one of the year's great supporting roles."

Albano's rise to mainstream fame was one of the real treats of the 1980s wrestling boom. The man everybody loved to hate had become the man everybody loved. But for Albano, success was a long time coming.

He'd been working hard since the early-1950s. He was big and athletic enough—he'd been to the University of Tennessee on a football scholarship and, after an Army hitch, had considered a career in boxing—but after a decade as a generic, mustachioed heel, and a few years of success as part of a tag team with Tony Altmore known as The Sicilians, his career had stalled.

It was only after Bruno Sammartino encouraged him to become a manager that Albano became a key figure in the WWF, guiding so many tag teams to the championship that he became known as "The Guiding Light." His 13 title winning duos included The Valiant Brothers, The Moondogs, and The Wild Samoans. He also brought Don Muraco, Greg Valentine, and Pat Patterson to the intercontinental title. Albano earned Manager of the Year honors from PWI in 1974, 1981, and 1986.

There had been colorful, loudmouthed managers prior to Albano, but his voice, which roared like a wood chipper, his comical bumps, and his rare ability to switch from buffoon to madman, put him, as Sammartino recently said, "A head and shoulders above everyone." Another Albano trademark was dressing as the wrestlers he managed, such as when he piloted the Asian team of Mr. Fuji and Mr. Saito, Albano wore wooden clogs and ceremonial garb.

"He'd wear those ridiculous things in public," said Bert Randolph Sugar, who co-authored with Albano *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pro Wrestling*. "He'd wear them to business meetings. And if you wanted to know what he'd had for lunch, just look at his shirt. But he was a delight. He loved kids. He loved doing charity work. He was a wonderful person. He was a work of art, in more ways than one."

Albano, who was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 1996, left behind a wife, four children, and 14 grandchildren. In Carmel, New York, where he made his home, Albano was remembered as a deeply religious, community-minded individual, always willing to help area businesses by lending his familiar voice to TV ads. As Albano's health declined, *Wrestlers Rescue* raised funds for his hospice care. How appropriate it was that a group dedicated to helping retired wrestlers assisted Albano during his final months, for despite his success elsewhere, Albano was first and foremost a member of the wrestling world. It's also fitting that *Wrestlers Rescue*, a relatively new organization, will get tremendous publicity from helping Albano. It's as if, even in death, someone is benefiting from Capt. Lou's hype.

□

For as out of control as Capt. Lou was in the ring, he was just as gentle and caring outside of it. Albano loved nothing more than spending time with his fans, especially the children.



Bear" upset Bruno Sammartino in 1971, ending Bruno's seven moments. He was Ivan Koloff's manager when "The Russian In fact, Albano was often involved in epoch shattering who made it all cook.

of the best in WWE history, made Snuka a star. But it was Albano all along the East Coast. The angle, shocking for its time and one Snuka got his revenge, battering Albano in a series of matches Crippler" Stevens to pile-drive Snuka on the concrete floor. would leave Albano for a new manager, Albano hired Ray "The dialect, humiliating him in public. When it appeared Snuka personal property, shouting at him in a kind of phony island villainy reached its zenith. Albano treated "Superfly" like his It was while managing Jimmy Snuka in 1982 that Albano's beating, too!"

just babble before, during, and after," Albano said. "Somehow, in the middle, I said the two or three sentences that sold tickets. Mostly, I just tried to make people want to see me get my ass kicked. Hopefully, the guy I was managing would catch a

"I just remember the point I wanna bring across, and then I of riling fans:

barker. Paul Heyman's online tribute quoted Albano's method but Albano seemed born with the blood of a demented pianist, His father had been a doctor, his mother a concert pianist, the hype!"

my back and part of my arm—but what the heck, it added to yelled—I looked down and saw my shirt was on fire! Burned made of polyester. Suddenly, Vince Jr. looked at me in horror and cigar, spilling ashes all over myself. I didn't know my shirt was McMahon Jr., I stood there yammering away and smoking a "One time when I was on TV being interviewed by Vince himself if it meant more revenue.

The Complete Idiot's Guide To Pro Wrestling, he'd gladly harm pit bull after too many turns in the pit. As Albano recounted in leathery old forehead. Up close he was as scarred up as an old Along with the rubber bands in his beard and the Hawaiian

LEGENDARY MANAGER DEAD AT 76

Whether you suffered or

celebrated the boisterous

showman, nobody can deny

that the aftershocks left by Lou

Albano's influence on the sport

will be felt for years to come

BY DON STRADLEY

FORGIVE THE OBIT writers if they couldn't quite do justice to Capt. Lou Albano, who passed away on October 14, 2009, at age 76. Even the homage on Raw seemed too quick, for despite Albano once telling The New York Times that he was, "Basically a regular guy ... trying to make a dollar and enjoy life," his career encompassed too much to fit into a simple tribute.

The wild and crazy Capt. Lou was always willing to put the business ahead of his own well being. On more than one occasion (face it, most occasions!), Albano bled for the sport he loved.

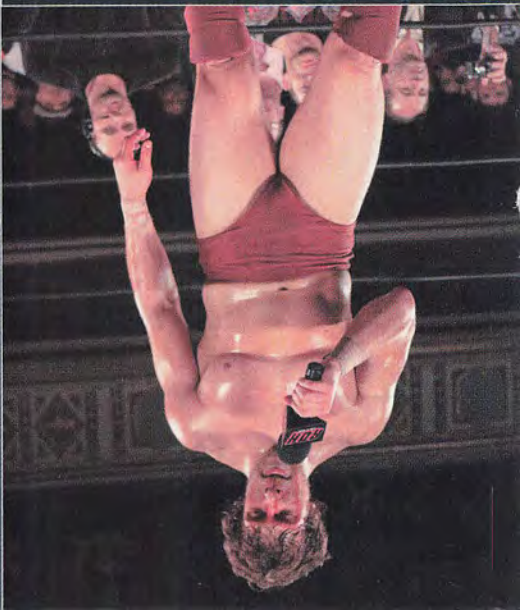


Though he was known primarily as a great manager of tag teams, Albano led some of the best-known singles stars the sport has ever seen. He helped propel Jimmy Snuka to a level of stardom few could have foreseen.



**CAPTAIN
LOU
SALES ON...**

Just as they have for so many years, both McGuinness (above) and Danielson (opposite page, left) paid respect to the fans and ROH following their final match. Though the two are both headed to the next big step, McGuinness seems to be the odds on favorite to become the bigger star.



vast wrestling acumen to a more universal style.

Meanwhile, McGuinness utilizes a simpler, but equally devastating, wrestling style that will be far more familiar to his opponents and to mainstream wrestling fans. It is a combination of hard strikes and clotheslines and European-inspired wrestling that combines the offenses of wrestlers like Finlay, John "Bradshaw" Layfield, and William Regal.

In the end, the futures of McGuinness and Danielson may hinge on the support they can garner within their new companies. Fortunately for Danielson, he has no shortage of boosters within WWE, including his former trainer Shawn Michaels and Jim Ross, who pushed for WWE to hire him. In TNA, McGuinness has his share of allies, including former ROH colleagues like Samoa Joe, Styles, and The Motor City Machine Guns, but few are in a position of influence. TNA brass like President Dixie Carter and head writer Vince Russo have likely never seen a McGuinness match and became interested in him only because WWE was.

"If it comes down to 'who you competing with each other.' And yet, somehow, they're still is in WWE, and Nigel is in TNA. Both are gone from ROH. Bryan himself at the irony of the situation. a leg up," said Lynn, laughing to know," then Bryan may just have

□

For now, it seems as though McGuinness has made the right choice and will continue to have good things follow him by joining TNA. The newly dubbed "Desmond Wolfe" was immediately tossed in with Kurt Angle, the company's biggest name.



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

unmatched technical wrestling ability to give him an edge over McGuinness in WWE. But they would be wrong. It's not that Danielson isn't a good wrestler. It's that he just might be too good. Most every wrestler newcomer to WWE is required to learn "the WWE style," usually by spending several months—or sometimes years—in WWE's developmental system. Wrestlers are taught to adapt their individual wrestling styles to fit in with the broader foundation of WWE pro wrestling.

But while Danielson's seemingly limitless arsenal of strikes, wrestling moves, and submission holds may dazzle audiences, they may not impress WWE management and keep up with him. And so much of Danielson's WWE training could be focused on stripping down his

THE FINAL SHOWDOWN

Over more than three years, the rivalry between "American Dragon" Bryan Danielson and Nigel McGuinness became one of the most significant in the history of Ring of Honor.

But while there may have been better matches between these two arch-rivals, none meant more than their showdown on September 26 in New York City.

Regardless of who came out the victor, both men had announced ahead of time that this would not only be their last match against each other, but their final night in Ring of Honor.

After the ring crew cleared the ring of the blizzard of streamers that rained down on the competitors during the ring introductions, Danielson and McGuinness set out to create the kind of ring magic that ROH fans had come to expect from these them.

For 35 minutes, each wrestler gave his all and met every expectation fans could have.

In the end, the referee stopped

the match when McGuinness could not defend himself from a flurry of elbows to the head by Danielson. "American Dragon" proved to be just a little bit better, but McGuinness showed he had more heart than his detractors gave him credit for. It was the story of their ROH careers.

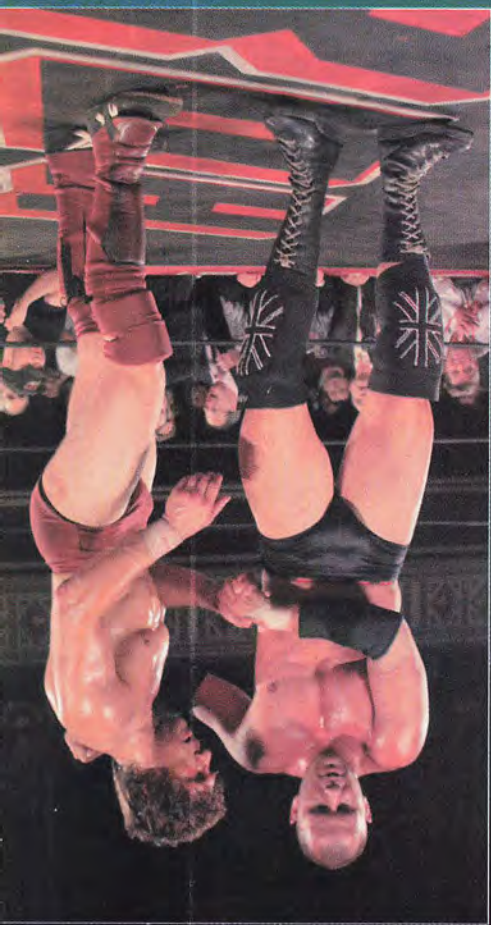
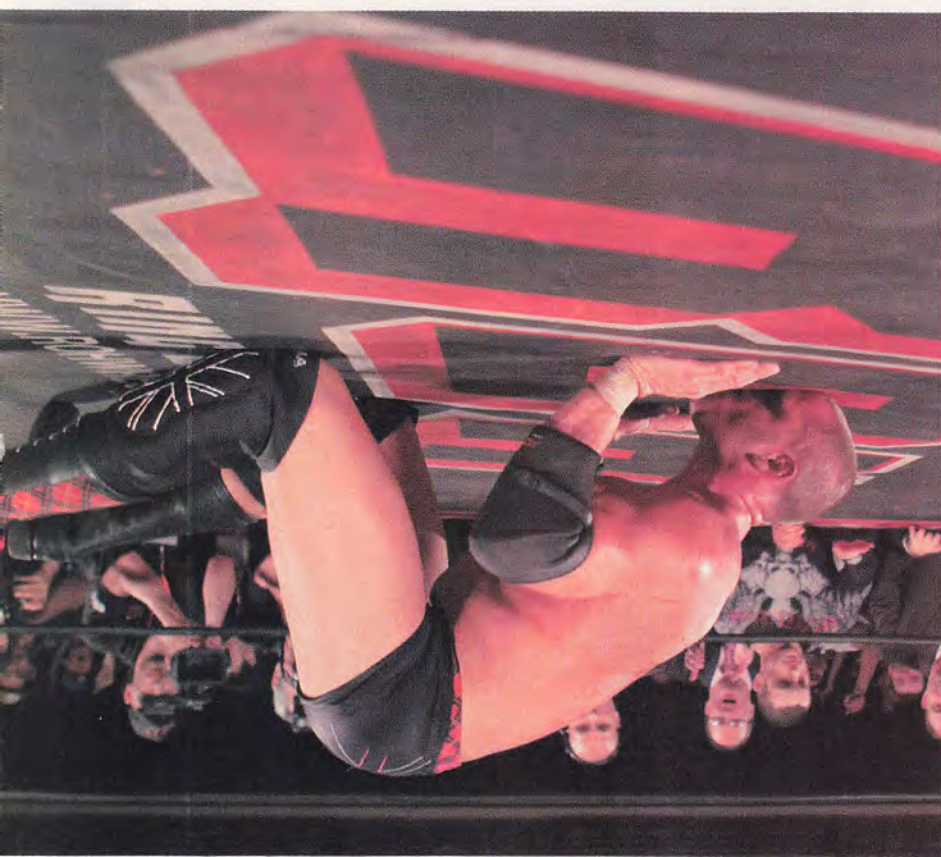
Following the match, a battered McGuinness thanked the fans for their support, and thanked Danielson for making him a better wrestler, despite their differences.

Danielson similarly thanked his fellow wrestlers, fans, and even the referee for having made his ROH career everything that it was.

Although the house D.J. played Europe's "The Final Countdown" as the fans sung along, Danielson's signature entrance music would not be the sound that he heard as he walked back to the Ring of Honor dressing room for the last time. As the music faded, the chants of "ROH! ROH!" rang out as Danielson disappeared through the curtain.

Next stop: WWE.

—Al Castle



employment in WWE, there has been not so much as a mention of Danielson.

In their respective new homes, there are several reasons why McGuinness is more likely to find success than Danielson—not the least of which are their dimensions. At 5'9", 185 pounds, Danielson would be among the smallest competitors in the WWE locker room, hovering at around the same dimensions as WWE mid-carders like Evan Bourne and Chavo Guerrero Jr., and dwarfed by most of WWE's main-event talent. While not a giant by any standards, at 6'2" McGuinness would actually look down at several top TNA names, including Angle, TNA World champion A.J. Styles, and Samoa Joe.

Height and weight aren't the only physical attributes that could hold back Danielson in WWE. Throughout his independent career, Danielson wore his plain appearance as a kind of badge of honor—a testament to the fact that the "American Dragon" was all about substance over style. But surrounded in a locker room by \$1,500 designer wrestling trunks, perfectly tanned bodies, and more six packs than a beer distributor, Danielson's pasty complexion, and doughy physique may communicate "bush league" more than it does "world class."

Meanwhile, McGuinness brings with him to TNA a reputation for being one of Ring of Honor's most flamboyant characters.

"The TNA fans are going to love this guy—or, perhaps more likely—love to hate him," former TNA and WWE wrestler Jerry Lynn said of McGuinness, whom Lynn beat for the ROH title in April. "Nigel's larger than life. On the other hand, it may take a little longer for Bryan to connect with WWE fans that don't already know his work."

While Danielson's fans may concede that McGuinness has the advantage in the charisma department, they may be pinning their hopes on "American Dragon's"



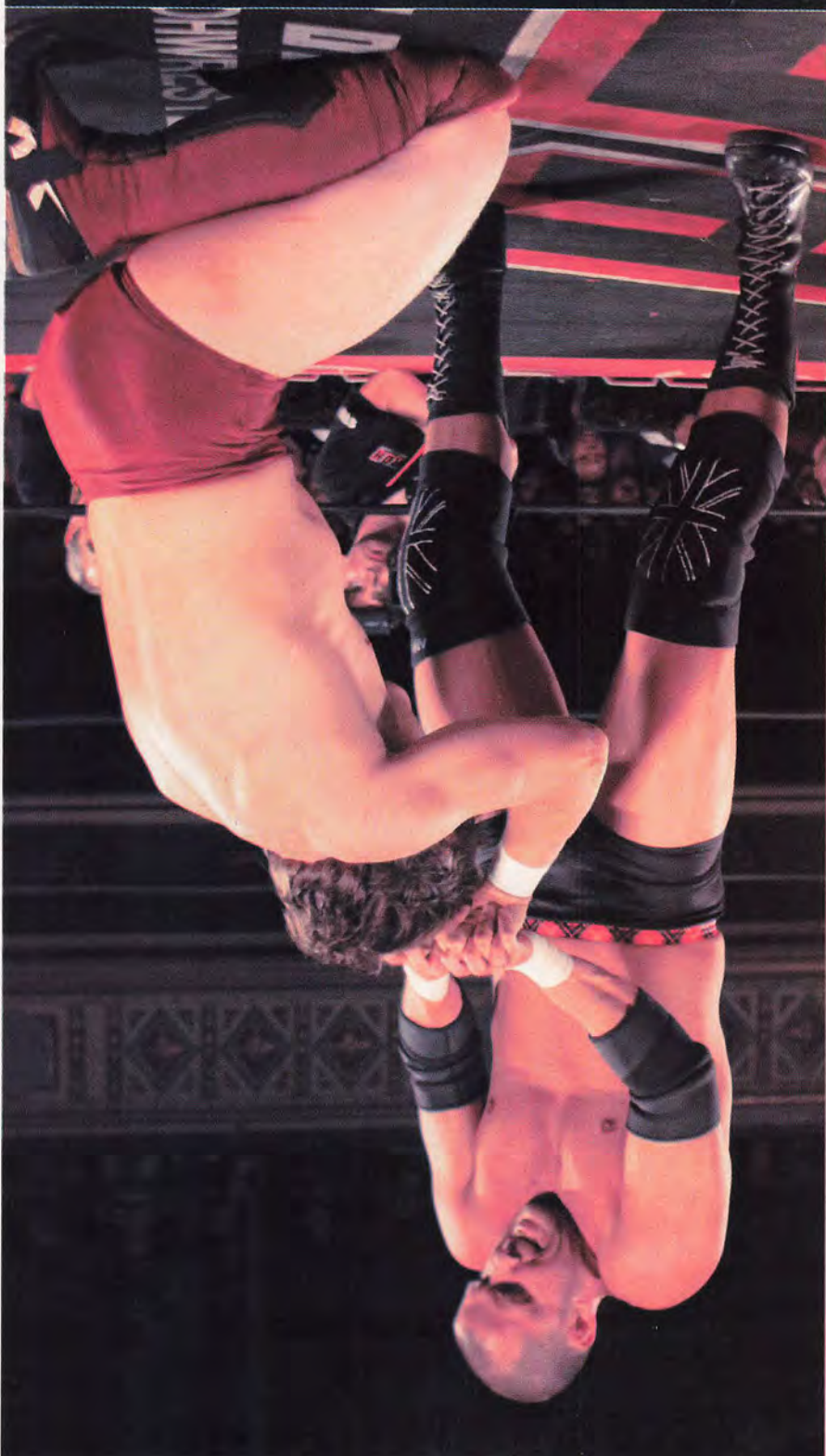
With a much more basic move set, Nigel stands to have less of a learning curve when it comes to a TV style of wrestling. With his stiff moves and power (above), McGuinness is set to step right in, whereas Danielson's wide range of moves (below) may be a bit too complex for WWE's TV presentation.



In recent years, no two men have fielded that question more than Ring of Honor's Bryan Danielson and Nigel McGuinness, two men who have earned a reputation for greatness despite the fact that the vast majority of wrestling fans have

likely never seen their work or even heard of them. Finally, McGuinness and Danielson have an answer to that question, and the answer is "now." Within days of each other, both men announced late this

One of the most obvious advantages McGuinness has over Danielson is his size and strength. At 6'2" Nigel isn't the biggest competitor in the sport, but in TNA he will stand above most of the top talent.



"There's no question that we got the better end of the deal," said one TNA veteran, who previously worked with both McGuinness and Danielson in ROH. "It shouldn't have taken WWE dropping the ball for us to have picked up Nigel. But however the deal came together, we're all glad it did." Meanwhile, weeks into his

buckle neckbreaker. signature Tower Of London top-turn-lying in a heap after delivering his and left the Olympic gold medalist in the final segment of the show episode of *Impact*. He returned later first appearing on screen on an attacked Angle within seconds of Danielson. On his very first night in TNA, McGuinness was positioned as the new nemesis to TNA's top star, Kurt Angle. Under his new moniker, "Wolfe" attacked Angle within seconds of first appearing on screen on an

Just days into their new jobs, McGuinness is already far ahead of Danielson. Of his very first night in TNA, McGuinness was positioned as the new nemesis to TNA's top star, Kurt Angle. Under his new moniker, "Wolfe" attacked Angle within seconds of first appearing on screen on an

"Danielson may be used to hearing a couple hundred fans call him 'The Best in The World' each night, but that don't mean anything here," said one WWE locker room veteran speaking on the condition of anonymity. Just days into their new jobs, McGuinness is already far ahead of Danielson. Of his very first night in TNA, McGuinness was positioned as the new nemesis to TNA's top star, Kurt Angle. Under his new moniker, "Wolfe" attacked Angle within seconds of first appearing on screen on an

While it seemed certain the two longtime rivals would pursue greener pastures around the same time, dreams of Danielson and McGuinness' fell through late in October—allowing TNA to swoop in, sign him up, and repackaging him as "Desmond Wolfe."



SOME OF THE best wrestlers in the world have at one time or another heard the question asked by a fan: "When are we going to see you in WWE or TNA?" The question, inherently, is one of the greatest compliments a wrestler could receive. It is an acknowledgment that a wrestler is clearly ready for prime time, and that the people running the country's two biggest wrestling companies would be crazy not to recognize wrestling's next big thing when they see him.

TEXT BY AL CASTLE
PHOTOS BY GEORGE TAHINOS

IT'S DANIEL SON VS. MCGUINNNESS AGAIN! THIS TIME, HOWEVER, IT'S LONG DISTANCE



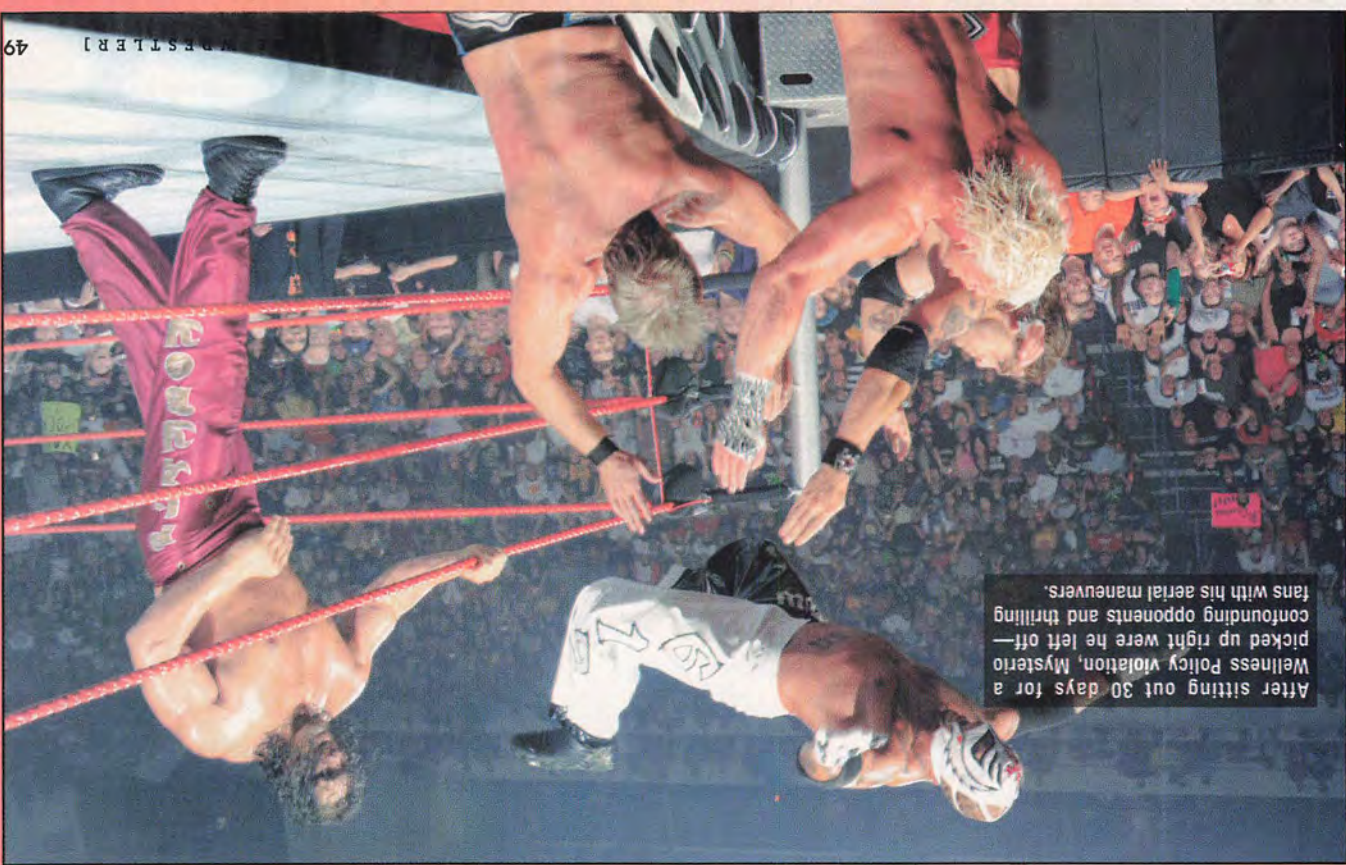
Kids go crazy for Mysterio's high-energy wrestling style and colorful ring attire (left). Rey also appeals to Hispanic and international audiences (below). Between his crossover appeal and merchandising power, Mysterio is a bankable asset WWE wants to retain for a long time.



about expanding into new international markets, there is no question that Mysterio is the most valuable competitor on the roster. Cena's puns and D-X's antics don't necessarily translate well for international audiences, but Mysterio as an underdog with the heart of a lion makes sense no matter what language you speak.

Besides being a marketing attraction and merchandise mover, Mysterio is also an inspiration to his peers. "Rey always works his tail off in that ring, even when he's in pain or tired or not feeling well. He never shows any of that stuff at all," said Morrison. "He's a quiet leader in the locker room. Guys see how hard he's working, and how he stays so upbeat and passionate, and it inspires us. When I wrestled him for the Intercontinental title, he made me step up my game just to compete with him, and I wrestled one of the best matches of my career."

Mysterio's influence is even felt in the independent circuit. "Fifteen years ago, it would have been completely ridiculous to imagine a guy weighing less than 200 pounds competing for a championship in WWE," said Ontario 5'10", 200-pound indy standout Tyson Dux. "Rey broke new ground for smaller wrestlers. He gave a lot of guys hope at a time when other people simply dismissed them as being too small to make it in wrestling." His suspension behind him, Mysterio is flying high again, and the fans—as well as WWE's front office—are cheering for him.



After sitting out 30 days for a Wellness Policy violation, Mysterio picked up right where he left off—confounding opponents and thrilling fans with his aerial maneuvers.

He's also a favorite of Hispanic audiences, the fastest growing demographic in the United States. Mysterio is fiercely proud of his ethnicity; he would have to be to tattoo the word "Mexican" in four-inch letters across his mid-section. He has been a fan favorite for nearly his entire 20-year career, and he always serves as a positive representation of Mexico and Mexican people. Rey never stooped to riding around on a "Juan Deer" tractor, and never would.

Mysterio's appeal certainly isn't limited to those demographic groups, either. As the plucky underdog with the innovative and exciting reversals, counters, flips, and daredevil dives, it's hard to find a fan that doesn't like Mysterio. Unlike Triple-H and John Cena (perhaps the only two WWE stars who come near earning the merchandizing revenue Mysterio does), Mysterio has never faced a significant backlash from the fans. Night after night, Mysterio engenders the loudest, most positive crowd reaction. With Jeff Hardy out of the picture, Mysterio has a firm grasp on that distinction.

With stars like Shawn Michaels and The Undertaker eyeing retirement in the not-so-distant future, WWE is facing a potential shortage of genuine headliners. Mysterio has the increasingly rare combination of wrestling ability, charisma, and marketability to help WWE retain its fan base and attract new viewers.

That's exactly why WWE deserves credit for suspending Mysterio in August after he violated the company's Wellness Policy.

It would have been easy for WWE officials to sweep Mysterio's transgression under the carpet, or issue a slap on the wrist in the form of a nominal fine. With Hardy leaving the company, the Smackdown brand was short on viable fan favorites, and Mysterio was the reigning Intercontinental champion. There was also the possibility that Mysterio's popularity might take a hit when news got out that he had suspended a drug and wellness policy, particularly among the kids who venerate him and the parents of those kids in the replica masks.

WWE made the difficult decision and issued its standard 30-day suspension, clearly showing that the Wellness Policy was being taken seriously. Mysterio was relieved of his I-C title by John Morrison, and the most profitable-per-pound performer in the company was sent to the sidelines.

Any fears about the effect of the suspension on Rey's fan base were allayed when he returned to action at the Hell in a Cell pay-per-view, and quickly stepped back into the World title picture. If anything, the 30-day break seems to have rejuvenated Mysterio and pushed him higher up on the card, which is best for all involved.

"WWE can really use a healthy and focused Rey Mysterio right now," said one WWE agent. "We can use all the stars we can get, and Rey is one of the biggest stars out there. He's also one of the most versatile and exciting wrestlers anywhere, and he can deliver the goods against just about any opponent." Mysterio is increasingly valuable as WWE continues to attract a larger share of the Hispanic audience. He was heavily featured in an October WWE tour of Mexico, and is one of the most popular celebrities in that nation. If WWE is serious

Whether WWE's smallest wrestler is fighting with or against men the size of Khalil, fans love how Mysterio repeatedly proves that he belongs in the same ring with the big boys.



In fact, at this stage of his career, a case can be made that Mysterio is the true MVP of WWE, and one of the most lucrative assets in the company. Listen to the fan reaction and look at the number of fans donning his merchandise at any WWE event on which he appears (and even those he doesn't). Mysterio is tremendously popular, particularly among two key demographics. He is beloved by kids who respond to his colorful ring attire and fast-paced offense. Young people can relate to Mysterio; he's smaller than the people around him, but he's courageous and heroic, like a real-life superhero, right down to the mask.

world championship during that span. would have collected four tag team, two Intercontinental, and a run would have lasted more than seven years, and that he lived novelty attraction, but few could have predicted his WWE masks and flashy offense, Mysterio could have been a short-plus-pound behemoth and musclemen. With his colorful of WWE, a promotion that has traditionally been ruled by 250-Rey Mysterio Jr. is one of the least likely stars in the history

REY Mysterio Jr. Why He Is WWE's Most Important Wrestler

Rey Mysterio Jr. may be the smallest wrestler on the WWE roster, but he brings a lot more to the table than his size. He may not have a title belt right now, but his value to the company cannot be overstated

By Dan Murphy

IT'S ONE OF wrestling's greatest ironies: A man widely considered to be too small to succeed in wrestling has become one of the top stars in the largest wrestling company in the world. Billed at 5'6" (and that's up on his tippy-toes) and weighing in at a mere 175 pounds,



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"People were so surprised their legend, Bruno Sammartino, had been beaten that they were waiting for the referee to continue the match or for Bruno to get the belt back. There were a couple of minutes of suspense."

A: There were probably so many that it would be an injustice just to mention a few of them. So many went out there and got beat up every night and were never given the opportunity to be a big star, like Red McNulty. But I look back and think of guys like Johnny Rodz, Tommy Angel, George South, and Mike Jackson.

Q: I remember Mike Jackson. He was a light heavy-weight, very exciting. Wasn't he a math teacher?

A: I think so. He now has a little wrestling school in Georgia. He can still move like he did back in the '80s.

Q: Did being a Communist heel ever cause you complications outside the ring?

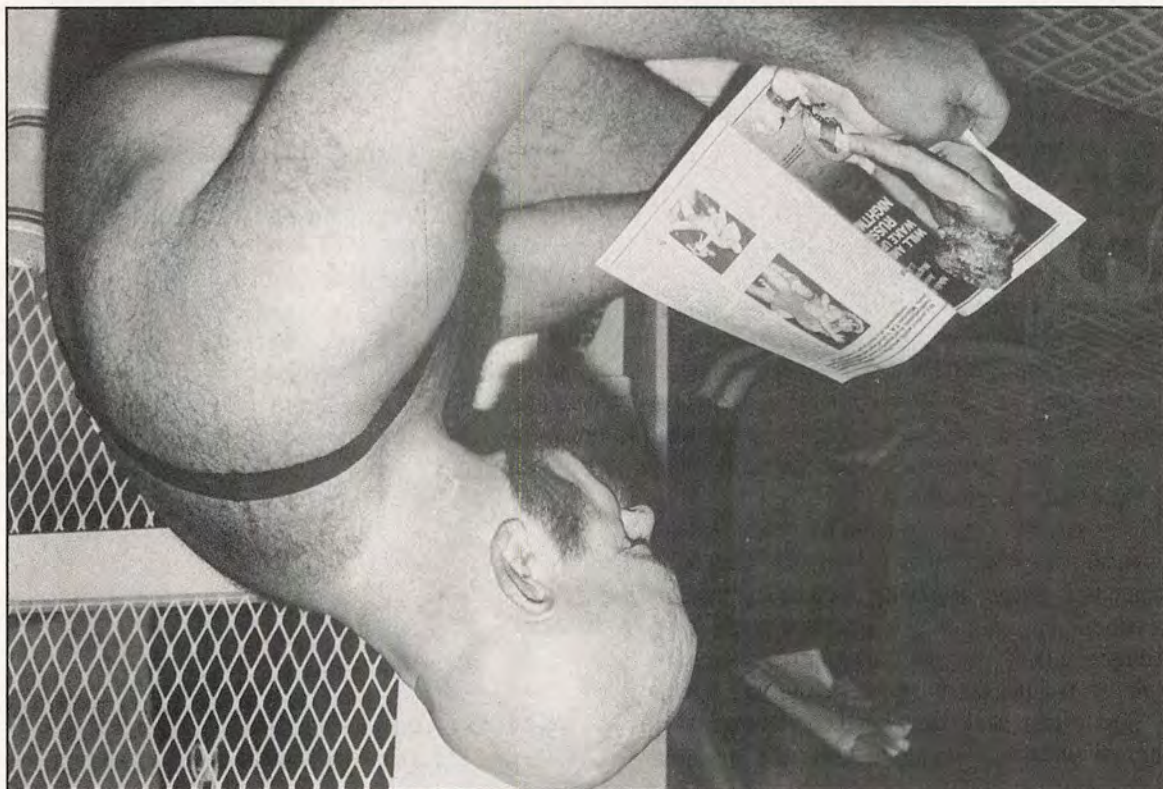
A: Yeah, a little bit. Russian people would come up to me to talk. One time, we had a conversation for several minutes and I didn't know a word the guy said. I would just go nyet or da and shake my head. I didn't know

Q: Have you ever considered how much Ivan Koloff, the character you created, has seeped into the mainstream? There was an article in *The Weekly Standard* several years ago that provided a "social analysis" of pro wrestling. It referred to Ivan Koloff as the greatest wrestling villain of all-time and mentioned how much you resembled Vladimir Lenin.

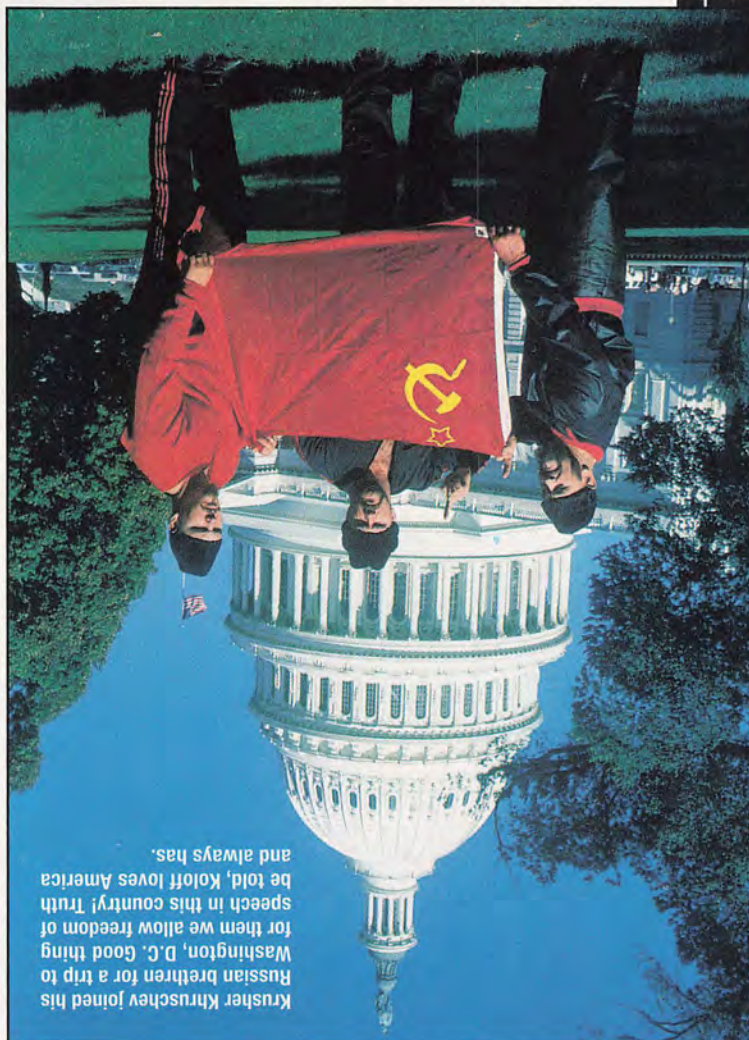
what he was saying or what I was answering. I had to be careful in public. Today, I would've definitely been shot. Back then, people would only use fists at a fight in a club. There are no rules today.

all-time and mentioned how much you resembled Vladimir Lenin.

Koloff reads up on a match between Nikita and Magnum T.A. After Magnum's near-fatal car wreck, Nikita came to his side and formed The Superpowers with Dusty Rhodes, leaving Uncle Ivan in the lurch.



Krushev Khrushchev joined his Russian brethren for a trip to Washington, D.C. Good thing for them we allow freedom of speech in this country! Truth be told, Koloff loves America and always has.



A: Yes. Turning Nikita was a good decision because The Four Horsemen and The Midnight Express were big at the time, and he was a good opponent for them. Dusty was the booker, so I understand why they did it. I became a good guy myself after that. I didn't feel totally comfortable with it, although people seemed to enjoy it.

Q: As a longtime fan, I enjoyed it because you were doing something different and getting the approval of the fans after so many years.

A: I enjoyed it. It was good.

Q: But, was it me, or did Paul Jones' team of The Russian Assassins fall a little flat?

A: They did all right, I believe. The big guy, Dave Shelton, broke his leg in a scaffold match and wore a brace on his knee after that. Jack Victory did okay. But if you're not figured into the main event, then any storyline is only going so far.

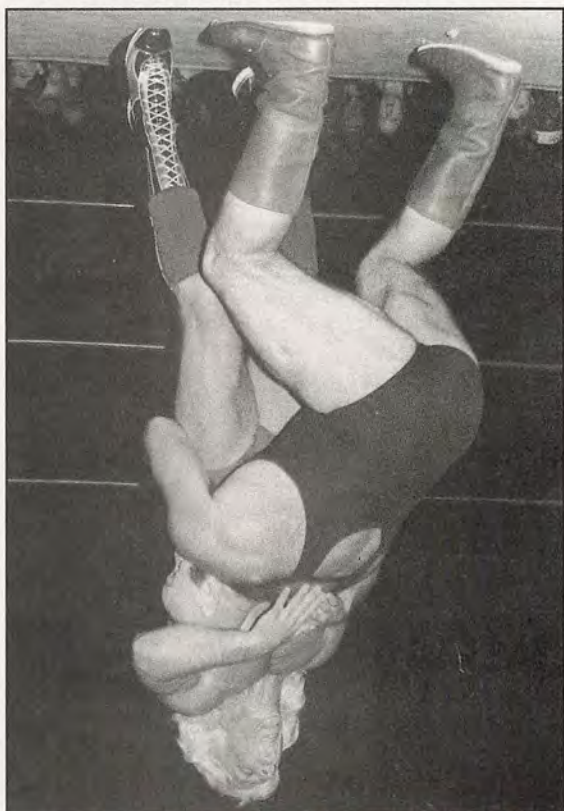
Q: You had to be the ring general in matches pitting you and Nikita vs. The Road Warriors. You were involved with a lot of younger wrestlers at the time. Did you enjoy it or was it kind of brutal?

A: I knew it was a necessity. With Nikita, I knew how I got over and became a star as Ivan Koloff as a 300-pounder in Montreal and New York. Nikita was all beat up from being a collegiate football player and he didn't know how to wrestle when he first came. I had to show him what to do for his first match in the dressing room. I warned him to not to mess up or he'd be fired. Actually, we'd be fired. I knew as long as Nikita didn't get beat in the ring, there was longevity for our team. There were times when our team was supposed to go down, and I went to the promotion and asked to take the fall for the team, not Nikita. If they hurt the strongest link in the team, then our team was done. I had learned that much about the business and they agreed. That's why I'd go out on a limb, do the hard work, take the falls, and feature Nikita in the best possible light. I'd lost weight before my last run against Backlund, down to about 220, so I was in great shape. During interviews, I would tell Nikita to stand about eight inches ahead of me to the right to make me look smaller so he would look like a giant.

Q: You had to peer over his shoulder to talk into the mike.

A: Part of my job was to protect him and it worked good.

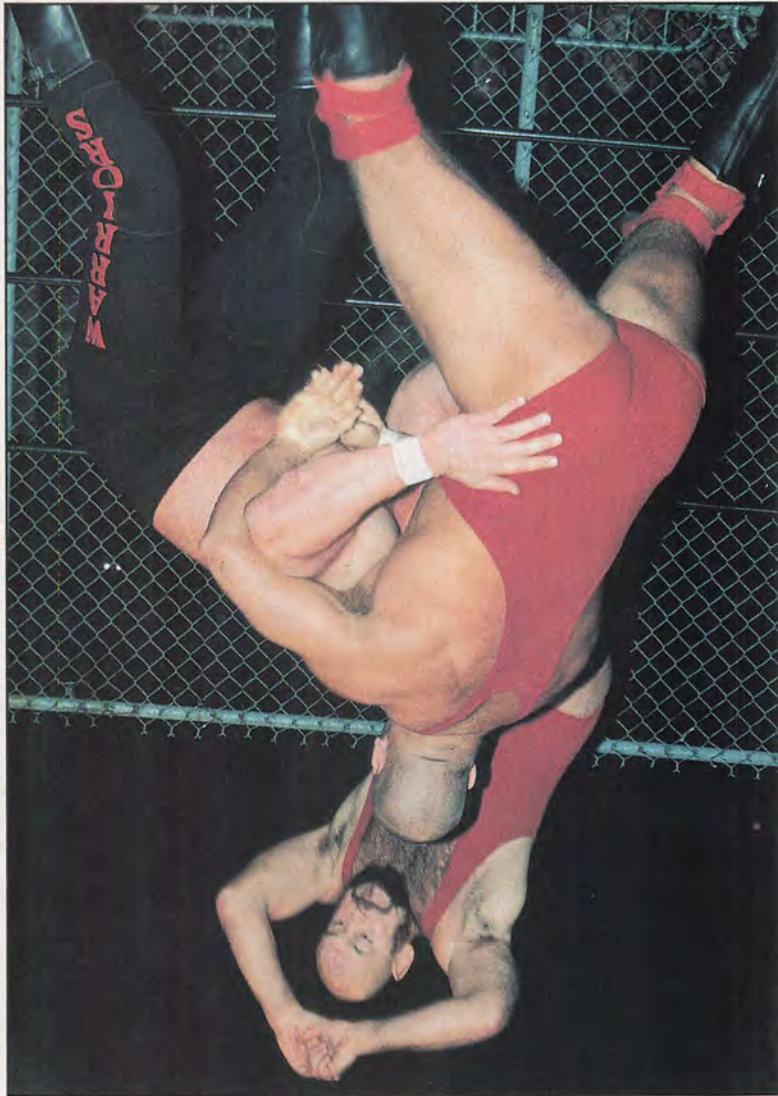
Q: Who were some of the most underrated wrestlers you encountered during your career?



Ivan had several shots at Ric Flair's NWA World title in 1981 but could never recreate the magic of that night in New York a decade earlier. As accomplished as his career was, Koloff doesn't put himself in the class of Flair or Sammartino.

"Nikita is a soldier for Christ and a great example for me to follow in his footsteps. I've tried just about everything else out there, but the only hope we have is receiving Jesus Christ."

A: It wasn't intentional. That was the shoulder that had been operated on, and it hadn't fully healed yet. To this day, I don't have full movement and can only get it up to three-quarters on my side. But I was still strong because of my weight training. So I put my weight behind it. I didn't want it to be a baby slap because this supposedly tough Russian was slapping Pat Patterson, this super athlete. We had done the same type of thing in Florida, where he slapped me. In Florida, he caught me higher and caused my eardrum to ring. So I laid it



in. I look at it now and I'm not surprised Pat came to me afterward and asked, "What the hell were you doin' man? You knocked my head off!"

Q: It definitely looked like that. You

accomplished your goal!

A: He didn't have to pretend he was not because he really was! No matter where I wrestled him or the situation, I knew he had a great mind for the business and was a super-great wrestler. I saw him at the Cow Palace with Ray Stevens in the '70s before they came east. What matches they had.

Q: Right before that incident, you had that last big run against Bob Backlund. In 1984, you were still very much a main-eventer, or at least seemed so. Then came your nephew Nikita. Were you apprehensive about taking on a nephew?

A: Not at all. Jim Crockett said, "Ivan, you've

excelled as a singles wrestler and as a tag team wrestler. But how would you like to have a nephew?" I thought it would be great. I knew at that time in the business, with my age in the 40s, that I had to keep things going, anything that would add to my repertoire. I was right and they were right. It added another four or five years to my career. It evolved into something really good with The Road Warriors and The Rock 'n' Roll Express. (Goes into broken English.) Although this Dusty Rhodes, this "American Dream," ended up taking my nephew away from me and becoming The Superpowers.

Q: That's because Nikita cried for Magnum T.A.

Magnum T.A.





There was tremendous bad blood between the Koloffs and Road Warriors (below), and their wars in the mid-'80s (opposite page) were legendary.

In the Georgia area, you'd have Atlanta, Macon, Columbus, and some smaller towns. Charlotte had some big towns, but not like up north. So did Florida. They were good, steady territories, especially when on fire and with the big crowds. A couple of my biggest years were in the mid-'80s when Nikita and I were champions.

A: Somehow along the way, you became a very good talker. I recall you giving some great promos. Did you study Russian culture or Soviet propaganda, or try to get into the mind-set of a Russian?

A: I struggled with that a little bit in the beginning. I didn't have a chance to talk much because I had Tony Angelo as my manager in Montreal, and Capt. Lou Albano in New York. Even in the AWA in '72 and '73, the "Big K" Stan Kowalski was my manager. It wasn't until I went to the Charlotte area that I started phasing in as my own talker. It took time to adjust the accent. I was raised around French-speaking people, like Mad Dog Vachon, one of my heroes, so I tried to sound something like that. Before, I was taught to keep the mystique by not talking too much, looking up, and keeping my arms folded to look menacing. I developed it over time.

When you watch guys like Roddy Piper and Ric Flair, it makes you try harder. And you truly would ad lib. Try waving the Russian flag and knocking the sol-diers in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Q: You mentioned that Capt. Lou Albano was your manager, and, of course, he passed away recently. Do you have a good Capt. Lou story?

A: Capt. Lou was a character who was great on the mike. Sometimes Vince McMahon Sr. would take us out to dinner after an intense two days of matches and interviews in Allentown or Hamburg, Pennsylvania. Every time, the Captain would start badmouthing Vince, calling him an cheap Irish S.O.B., and the boys would laugh. Vince would get up and act like he was going to slap Lou. Ric Flair and Blackjack Mulligan would do the same thing at bars after the shows. Everybody would love it, especially the boys.

Q: One of the most realistic encounters I remember was the incident involving you and Pat Patterson. He was a color commentator, and you confronted him because you didn't like what he was saying about you on TV. You ended up slapping him, and it seemed like a heck of a slap. Then you guys had a full-fledged feud. Do you remember the details of that?

"I needed to get going, so I'd pop some speed, and soon it became recreational. I was still functional because I was sweating the chemicals out of me every day, or at least that's what I thought."

there. People were waiting outside and tried to upset the cab. That Cold War mystique continued wherever I went in the States, Australia, and Japan. Everybody wanted to see the Russian guy get beat. That would make the fans much happier.

Q: Throughout the 1970s, you wrestled in every major

territory, including the AWA, Georgia, Florida, and the Mid-Atlantic. How much did beating Bruno help your career? Your reputation had to precede you wherever you went.

A: Even though the NWA was separate from Vince Sr.,

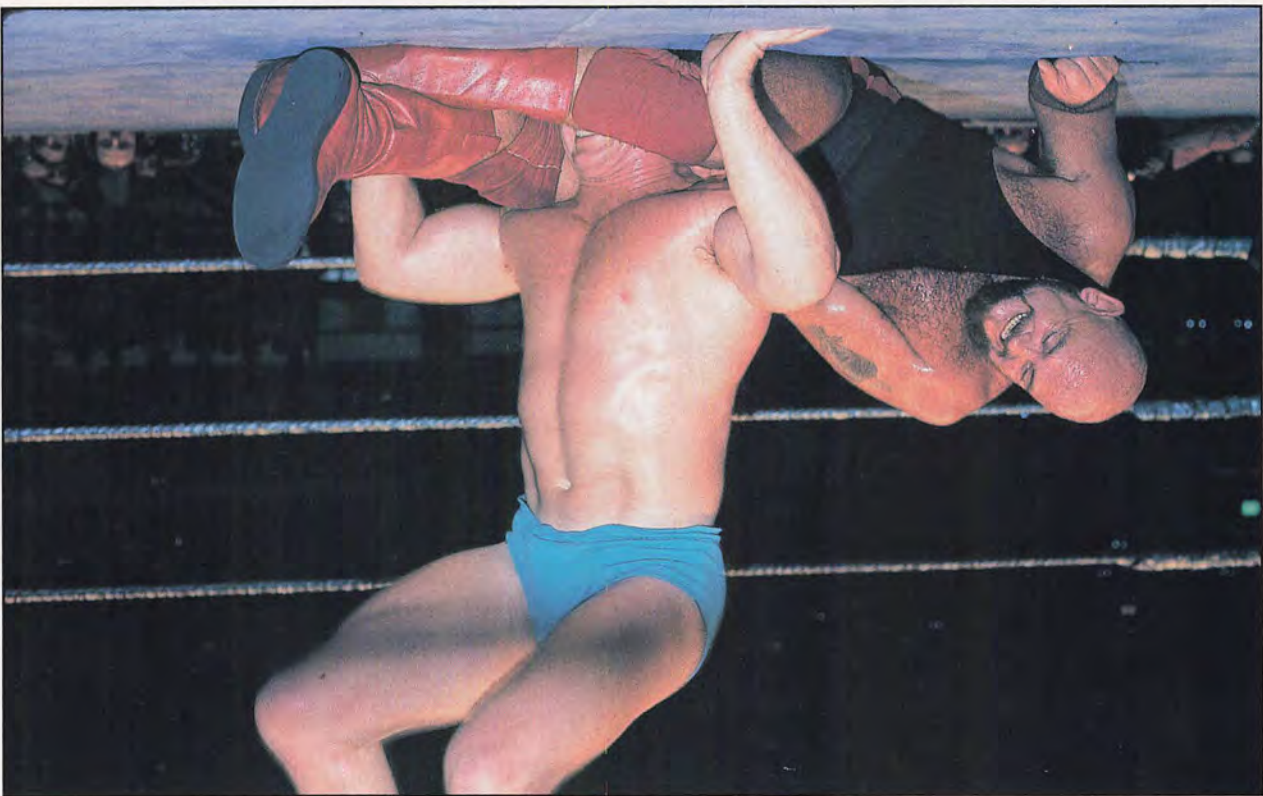
people still respected the WWWF because it was the Big Apple, Madison Square Garden, all of that. But even in the NWA, it gave me credibility against my opponents, whether it was Jack Brisco or Ric Flair or whoever. If a champion beat me, it made the NWA look that much better than the WWWF. But I ended up winning significant belts in all these areas, including Japan,

because they realized I had drawing power. I was glad they recognized that.

Q: Of all those places I mentioned, which was your

favorite place to work?

A: I don't know if I had a favorite. In the WWWF at the time, you were making big money, although not as much as today. There was Madison Square Garden, the Boston Garden, Washington, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh. Because those were larger populations, I could go around the loop—gather up 10 or a dozen big shows—and have a super month.



Bob Backlund uses his agility to work his way free from Koloff's leg scissors during a WWF title defense in 1978. Backlund's manager, Arnold Skaaland, knew a thing or two about how to wrestle Koloff. Skaaland previously managed Sammartino.



Q: Did you win or lose your first match?

A: I more than likely lost. I don't remember winning until a couple of years into my career in the Vancouver area.

Q: I'm sure you've heard this a thousand times. You

don't sound like Ivan Koloff.

A: [Goes into broken English.] What do you mean, com-

rade? I've been Russian all my life. I've been Russian here, Russian there. These Americans are all alike. They think they are the greatest athlete, but the Olympics tells the truth because every time Russian gets out there, they pave the road to Moscow with gold medals.

Q: You enjoyed your first success in Toronto when you

beat Johnny Rougeau for the Canadian International title. He was arguably the most popular star in Canada at that time. That was a huge win, wasn't it?

A: Yes, I won the title from Rougeau, lost it back to him, and then regained it again. I also defended against

Q: You've had a life of incredible highs and some lows. You'd have to think of the height as being when you

beat Bruno in Madison Square Garden. Our pub-

lisher, Stu Saks, was a teenage fan at the time, and, at the first show he attended at Madison Square

Garden, you beat his idol, Bruno, for the title. He said you could hear a pin drop. Could you describe

the atmosphere?

A: It was totally surprising to me because I thought I'd done something wrong. If I recall, Bruno might have said that I ended up tearing the muscles in his stomach

when I came off the top rope. But the people got real quiet. Did somebody have a stroke? Did I mess up?

Didn't the referee count to three? People were so surprised their legend, Bruno Sammartino, had been beaten that they were waiting for the referee to con-

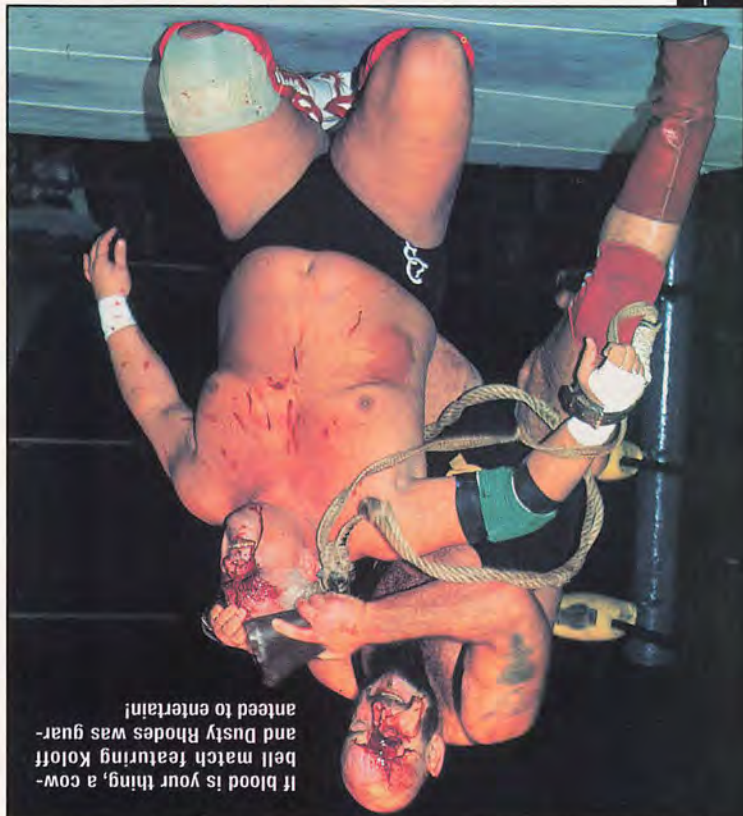
tinue the match or for Bruno to get the belt back. There were a couple of minutes of suspense because this Russian had just beaten their hero for the title. They told me to get back to the dressing room. I asked for the belt, but they told me to forget it and hurry back to the dressing room.

Q: Bruno was as popular as you could be in New York and the Cold War was at its height. Did you worry

for your life or take precautions?

A: I had never realized the degree of intensity between Russians and America during the Cold War. I knew Americans and Canadians didn't like Russians, so there was that fear factor, but I underestimated how serious the feelings were. Sure, I had gone through intense times and matches in Montreal. The fans were so wild that I had to fight my way out. But winning the title at the Garden was truly scary. There was a cab waiting in the basement of MSG, ready to exit and get me out of

If blood is your thing, a cowbell match featuring Koloff and Dusty Rhodes was guaranteed to entertain!



ager. Most wrestlers of your era didn't necessarily

grow up as fans. Who were your favorites?

A: Ilio DiPaolo. He supposedly recovered from polio and delivered beautiful dropkicks. He later owned a resta-

rant in the Buffalo area. There was Yukon Eric. "Whipper" Billy Watson could throw guys around with

one hand. I got to wrestle a lot of these guys. The Mighty Igor was still around. I liked The Tolos Brothers.

I enjoyed Lord Layton, who became a commentator in the Toronto area. I got to wrestle Dick the Bruiser and Crusher, and wrestled the original Sheik in Detroit. But

Bruno was my man, the champ—290 pounds from Abruzzo, Italy. I was intrigued to see him kneel before every match and say a prayer. I thought he must be

such a sincere, nice man. I found out later from Bruno that a guy died in the ring during one of his first match-

es. Ever since, he prayed his opponent would not sustain serious injury or death in the ring.

Q: So, in that sense, it was very sincere.

A: Yes, he was not just using it as a ploy or nice guy tactic. By the way, I also liked the Kalmikoffs. They were the Russian team back then, and, ironically, their names were Ivan, Nikita, and Stan. Actually, I was named after a Russian guy from the 1940s and '50s, Dan Koloff. I think he passed away before I could meet him.

Q: Did you wrestle as Irish pirate Red McNulty in your very first match?

A: Yes, even when I wrestled a TV match against Bruno in '63 in Pittsburgh.

"Bruno was in great shape. I would look out of the dressing room before a show or TV taping, and he'd be running around the arena for 30 minutes or longer. I'm supposed to wrestle that guy tonight?"

Rick McGraw, and Jay Youngblood in years past. There are a lot of guys who made bad decisions who need to be grateful, too. Maybe he wasn't into drugs like I've been, but look at Ric Flair. I love him like a brother. He's truly a legend in this business, a sweetheart of the spirit who loves people. He's in my prayers. Ted DiBiase came up with concept of wrestling with a Christian message, and I've been able to be involved and give my testimony. Nikita was the one who introduced me to the Lord and the gift He left for us. Nikita, who is also a minister, called me the other day and said that 74 people had made a commitment [to Jesus] at his event in Washington State.

Q: It's neat that he became like family in real life.

A: That's right, exactly. We're brothers in Christ now. People

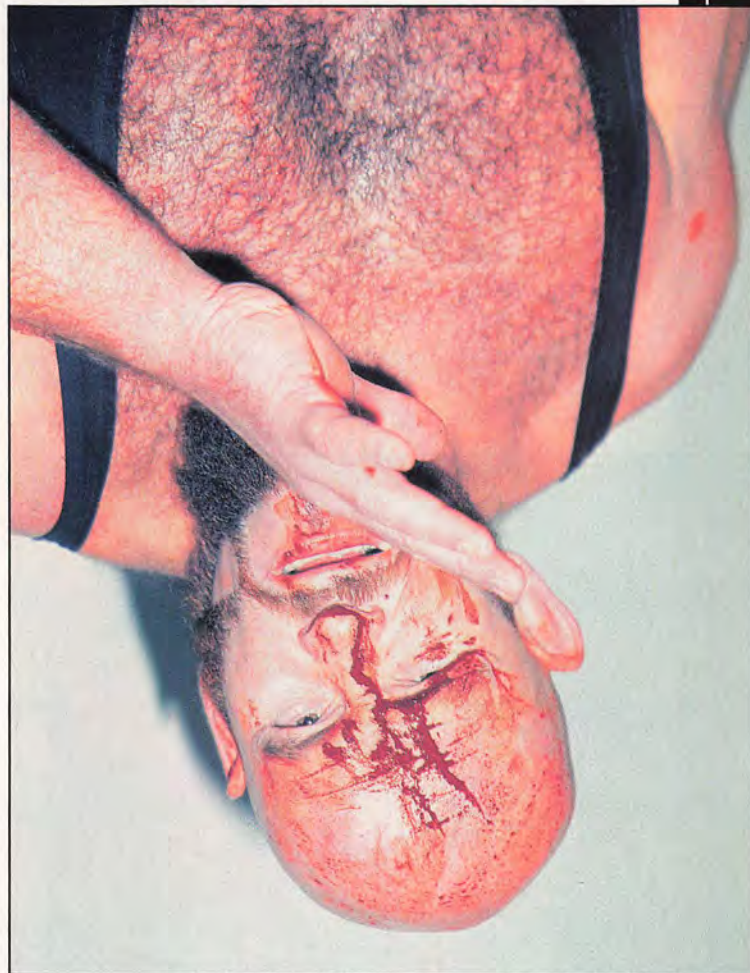
ask if we're related. I say not by blood, but through the blood of Jesus. Nikita is a soldier for Christ and a great example for me to follow in his footsteps. I've tried just about everything else out there, but the only hope we have is receiving Jesus Christ, in my personal—but accurate—opinion.

Q: And it seems that you've also been blessed by a great home life and wrestling career. You mentioned admiring Bruno Sammartino when you were a teen-

Sammartino had several opportunities to avenge his big loss to Koloff, and while "The Russian Bear" always provided a stiff challenge, Bruno usually prevailed. Koloff idolized Bruno and speaks highly of him to this day.



Like most wrestlers, particularly those who stay around as long as Koloff, living with pain was as much of a challenge as winning a title. Ivan's recently released book discusses in detail his troubles with drugs and alcohol.



of that time period, and I can see it in my eyes during my interviews.



Koloff had some memorable matches with Ray Stevens before the two decided to join forces and go for the gold in the NWA. Among his many titles, Ivan held the NWA World tag team title on four separate occasions.

"It would be an honor to do more for WWE. I'd probably like the opportunity to say something about God, being WWE champion, and having the chance to wrestle up there."

times, it was 20 times. I hit that cage head-on. Bruno was my hero when I got into wrestling, and I looked up to him. He inspired me to get in there and produce. Bruno was in great shape. I would look out of the dressing room before a show or TV taping, and he'd be running around the arena for 30 minutes or longer. I'm supposed to wrestle that guy tonight? I've seen guys train really hard, from Mike Scicluna to Chris Tolos. It's hard to name just one. Bob Backlund would work out for an hour before a match. So would old-timers like Danny Hodge, Karl Gotch, and Lou Thesz. I knew that if I wanted to keep making a payday, I had to keep up. Wrestling seven days a week, I stayed in pretty good shape anyway. I just tried to avoid serious injuries, because promoters didn't want you to take a night off for a sprained ankle or sore ribs, or they'd be looking to replace you with someone else. You had to get out of the hospital and get to work.

I hit the post really hard in Florida, and my whole shoulder became bruised and turned black. I knew it was something serious. About a year later, spurs developed because it had started to heal itself from a hairline fracture. They had to go in and operate. They had to consequently cut an inch off my right shoulder, re-tie, and scrape all those spurs out of there. During that time, I was wrestling for Georgia Championship Wrestling, and the doctor told me to take three months off, and do therapy and exercises. I knew there was no way that could happen. I asked the promotion if I could take three weeks off to heal up. They told me to put a sling on it and manage my partner. You had to stay active to keep your job. That's the way it was back then. All the other wrestlers, the main-eventers especially, had to work through cracked ribs, sprains, and lots of little things when they needed time off.

Q: In your book, you talk about your struggles with drugs and alcohol. Having to be in a different town every night obviously didn't help. Was the wrestling lifestyle to blame for those problems, or were you?

A: I think a combination of both. The demands on my body really didn't help. I was raised with the idea that if you worked hard, you could celebrate with a few beers. I got that mindset right away in wrestling school and when I was struggling as Red McMulty—my first persona for the first five or six years. I celebrated by

drinking every night I wrestled, and would get a six-pack for the longer trips. Once I became Ivan Koloff and became the Canadian champion, and left Montreal for New York and the WWWF, I was definitely drinking a lot. I don't recall doing anything with pills or drugs until '73 in Minnesota in the AWA. I got a ruptured disk in my lower back, which was really painful, and had to take



American fans counted on tough guys like Dick the Bruiser to score one for the U.S.A., but Koloff never gave an inch to any man and was not afraid to mix it up with the best in the world.



He looked like a Russian and sounded like a Russian, but when approached by an actual Russian, the extent of Kolofov's end of the conversation was "nyet" and "da."



It's been many years since Kolofov was seen with hair on his scalp. The shaved head was a good look for a Canadian-turned-Russian, adding to his aura.



people or situations. I talk about my feelings and some personal stuff that happened to me. I talk about my story as a fan, having a dream for wrestling, getting into wrestling, the choices I made, and the price I paid. Just about anybody out there can relate.

For me, it's interesting to talk about the old days. I've even looked at some videos and realize that I could really move at one time. It gives me encouragement that I can stumble around a little bit with my nagging injuries. I'm proud that I can still work out four times a week with light weights, so I keep a diligent program to stay in halfway decent shape—although I'm about 40 or 50 pounds overweight for my age. But I'm still strong with muscle tone, at least as good as these older fellows can do.

Q: Wrestlers in the past have praised your physical conditioning. When I was talking to Bruno Sammartino a few years ago, he remarked that you had great speed for someone weighing 300 pounds. He mentioned specifically your first cage match.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: He said you were really hard to keep up with in that one.

A: I know I didn't end up bleeding as much as I ordinarily did in cage matches. But if he ran me into the cage six

"I highly respect the guys who have been stars over the past 20 years and true legends like Ric Flair, who has held the NWA, WWE, and WCW titles. I'm just honored to be recognized anymore."

Q: In addition to being a world champ, you might

be the most decorated wrestler of all-time.

A: I never thought of myself as someone of Ric Flair's

caliber or nearly as famous as anyone who's been involved in wrestling since pay-per-views came along. WWF and NWA wrestlers always appeared overseas, but pay-per-views changed everything. I highly respect the guys who have been stars over the past 20 years and true legends like Ric Flair, who has held the NWA, WWE, and WCW titles. I'm just honored to be recognized anymore.

Q: I find it surprising that you're not celebrated a bit

more in WWE. You're a legendary wrestler, basically

the WWE World champion at one time. Because

Bruno was the guy you beat for the title, do you

think some of that has rubbed off on you? Is that

why they don't want to talk about Ivan?

A: That could be the reason. I've often wondered about that

and even let them know that I'd be interested. It would be an honor to be associated with WWE, because it represents professional wrestling today. I wrestled for so many years and was a champion in most of the territories. I don't think I should be punished because they don't want to mention Bruno. I know Bruno feels Vince Jr. changed the company from the way his dad had it, made it more Hollywood, but he can't knock success. Listen, it was an honor to beat Bruno for the title. He is seven years older than me, so I looked up to him when I was a teenager. I entered wrestling school in 1961 and was still there when he won the title in '63. I even got to

wrestle him that year in Pittsburgh. Then again, it would be an honor to do more for WWE. I'd probably like the opportunity to say something about God, being WWF champion, and having the chance to wrestle up there. I've been doing autograph signings for Children's Miracle Network for 17 years, so maybe we can work that into it. It would be great for Vince to acknowledge me and expose my ministry. I'd love being around the boys and the current superstars. Maybe he's waiting until I'm not around anymore to honor me.

Q: You mean he's waiting for the 10-bell salute?

A: [Laughs.] I don't think he'll go that far.

Q: I understand your point, though. You're a legend

A: Both, but I use the book to talk about my life rather than knocking other guys or bringing up dirt about other

you, the wrestling industry, or both?

Wrestling Fake? The Bare Facts. Is the book about

easy get. I'd like to ask about your book, is That

Hart, and Randy Savage. It seems you would be an

relationships with people like Billy Graham, Bret

without baggage. Vince has had very contentious

it mattered little that Koloff's WWF reign was a mere three weeks.

On the strength of that one match on his resume, he would be a

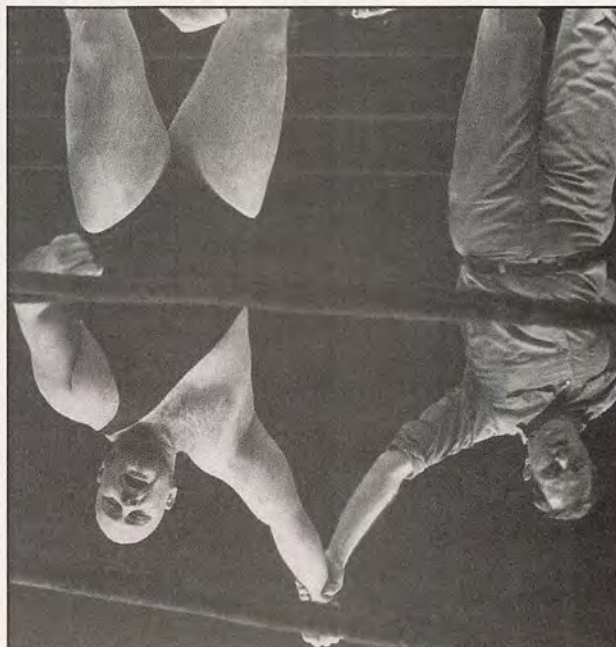
main-eventer anywhere, including Tokyo, Japan.



Interview Photos by Rachel Marley



Koloff was declared the winner by referee Dick Kroll (above) before quickly being whisked away to the locker room, posing for a few photos along with manager Lou Albano (right), and being taken away by taxi. His life would never be the same.



Q: Have you been through an identity crisis in your life? To all the wrestling fans and your peers, you're known as Ivan Koloff. You're probably had time for it.

A: I can't remember any type of fanfest or gathering before Cauliflower Alley. I wish we'd had them years ago, but, being involved in the NWA or WWF, my schedule was nonstop anyway so I wouldn't have

earn extra money and not leave the business entirely. That wasn't the case a generation ago.

Koloff did the unthinkable on January 18, 1971, when he ended Bruno Sammartino's WWF title reign at New York's Madison Square Garden after a kneedrop from the top turnbuckle.



Q: I once believed that Wahoo McDaniel was the most prolific wrestler of all-time, but I've reconsidered that. After taking a second look at your resume, I realize that you won titles in virtually every terri-

A: The "Russian Bear" Ivan Koloff, yes. I'm proud of the fact that I've been fortunate enough to contribute to the business and leave some kind of mark. When I look back to when I was a child, with a humble background of nine brothers and sisters on a farm, and having my dream come true, ending up as someone famous in wrestling—a former WWF champion, an NWA tag champ, and Asian tag champ—it's incredible. I have to pinch myself and remember it's really me.

Q: So it's become more than a CB handle.

A: Everybody refers to me as Ivan Koloff, including my immediate family. Others members of my family, such as my brothers and sisters, may still refer to me by my birth name. I answer to Ivan Koloff. That name is registered with the government and I've been known as that since 1967. Personally, I feel like that's who I am now.

Q: Fair enough. Let me re-phrase the question: Who are you first and foremost?

A: I'll leave it at that. I have a concern for privacy, so I'd rather just leave my birth name and the people who raised me out of it. People tend to hunt you down and give you a hard time.

Q: Isn't your real name ... ?

A: I'll leave it at that. I have a concern for privacy, so I'd rather just leave my birth name and the people who raised me out of it. People tend to hunt you down and give you a hard time.

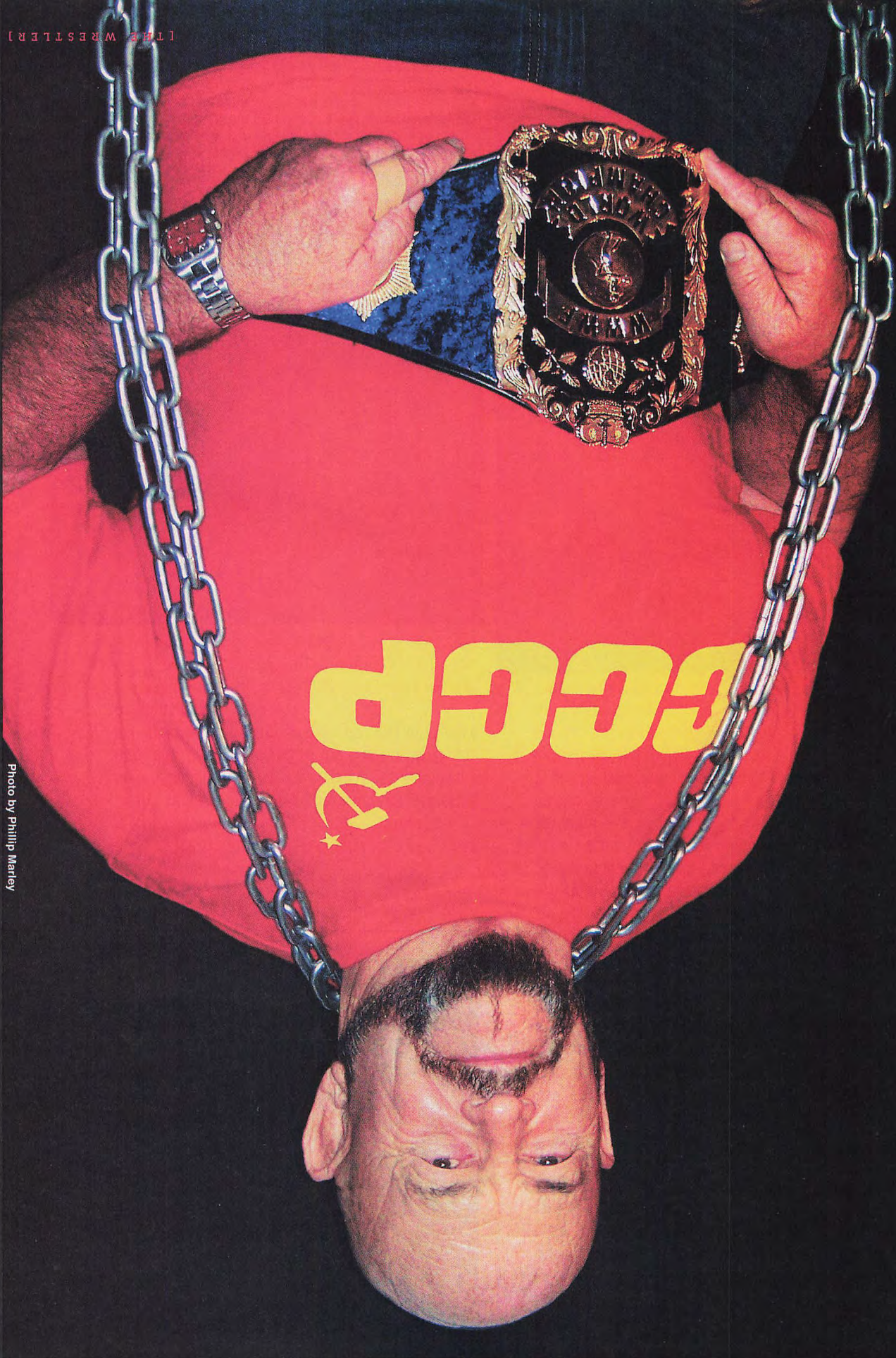


Photo by Phillip Marley

[THE WRESTLER]

I V A N K O L O F F

"I love the United States of America"

WCM. Ironically, he was a fan favorite in a feud with former manager Paul Jones, a symbolic development considering the recent fall of the Berlin Wall.

Now an ordained minister, Koloff, 67, recounts his career in more detail in his autobiography, *Is That Wrestling Fake? The Bare Facts*. The book, co-written by Scott Teal, is available at ivankoloff.com, where interested parties can book him for public appearances, donate to his ministry, or arrange to have him perform wedding ceremonies.

"I found the 'Russian Bear' to be quite tame, coming across as very grandfatherly at this stage of his life," commented Senior Writer Harry Burkett, who questioned the former WWF champ in this 90-minute interview. "It was a precious opportunity to speak to someone who was at the center of so much wrestling history. And, on a much deeper level, his personal trials and triumphs can be very instructive to others."

Q: A lot of fans may find it surprising that the "Russian Bear" retired not to Moscow or Leningrad, but to North Carolina. What town do you live in?

A: Greenville, North Carolina, about 40 miles from the east coast. I've moved around a lot during my career, which, including the independent circuit, has lasted 47 years. I ended up living in a lot of cities, starting in Toronto and going to Hamilton, Vancouver, Montreal, Minneapolis, Charlotte, Atlanta, Tampa, and New York. I settled down in this area because this is where my wife is from. Thank God she lets me stay with her.

Q: You were an international star. How difficult was it to settle down after traveling the world for so many decades?

A: I still get exposed to wrestling enough that I don't miss it. Two weeks ago in Clayton, North Carolina, I was with nephew Nikita, along with The Barbarian and The Warlord, at an independent card. Because of my lack of condition, I can't be involved as much as I was before, but it's good to see the boys again. I do these fanfests at least a couple of times a month.

Q: Retired wrestlers have it easier today because there are a number of nostalgia reunions where they can

I VAN KALMIKOFF. Nikolai Volkoff. Alexis Smirnov. Boris Zhukov. Throughout the decades, countless heels became the face of our Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union, but no one personified Russian villainy as superbly as Ivan Koloff. For generations of fans and the mainstream of American culture, Koloff was synonymous with the Red Menace.

That was quite a career path for someone who grew up with a total of nine brothers and sisters on a humble farm in Ontario, Canada. Koloff remains mum about his background, adhering to the old-school philosophy of preserving his larger-than-life mystique. For nearly 45 years, his sole identity—even among his friends—has been that of Ivan Koloff.

The "Russian Bear" admits, however, that he loves the United States. After all, the international star has lived in North Carolina for years. He is married to wife Renae and has nine grandchildren. He is also a born-again Christian, spreading the Word in churches and prisons. Koloff is remarkably candid about his prior struggles with alcohol and drugs.

Success came to Koloff quite early when he upset Bruno Sammartino for the WWF World title at New York's Madison Square Garden on January 18, 1971, concluding "Da Brune's" 7½-year reign. His championship stint ended three weeks later when Pedro Morales defeated him at the next MSG card.

Those three weeks of glory ensured that Koloff would be a main-eventer in any territory he chose. Koloff battled every top star in the business, including Verne Gagne, Dick the Bruiser, Mil Mascaras, Andre the Giant, Dusty Rhodes, and Tommy Rich. He picked up numerous regional championships along the way, including the Southern, Mid-Atlantic, Puerto Rico, and WWA heavyweight titles. He also formed successful tag teams with Mr. Saito, Alexis Smirnov, and Ray Stevens.

Yet his most memorable partner will always be nephew Nikita Koloff. Their feuds with The Road Warriors and The Rock 'n' Roll Express were legendary in the mid-1980s. Often, Koloff found himself as the ring general in a squared circle full of hot, rising stars. Koloff eased out of the national spotlight soon after Jim Crockett Promotions became

2 MAGAZINES IN 1! THE WRESTLER/INSIDE WRESTLING

Okay, it was an experiment. We took a gamble. Nobody had ever thought of binding two magazines, back cover to back cover, and selling them as one package. It wouldn't have worked with most magazines, but *The Wrestler* and *Inside Wrestling* have been so closely associated for the last 40 years, we thought it just might work. Well, it did! Reader response has been overwhelmingly positive. So if you missed the combination issues we've published so far, here's a chance to order them.

Vol. 2, 2005: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "The Angle Zone: Enter At Your Own Risk!" 60-Minute Interview: Bob Orton Jr. Also inside: Booker T, Michaels-Christian, A.J. Styles, Roy "Big Bossman" Taylor. **Cover Story—Inside Wrestling:** "Edge Of Insanity! Has He Ruined His Future?" Also inside: Scott D'Amore, Paul London, Orlando Jordan, Joey Matthews, Kim Neilson, Kenny Bolin, Dunn & Marcos, Simon Dean, Mana, Kane-Snitsky, Magnus & Davari, Pat Kenney.

Vol. 3, 2005: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "Hogan Steals WrestleMania!" 60-Minute Interview: Terry Funk. Also inside: Cornette vs. Heenan, Peley Williams, 10 unforgettable WrestleMania moments. **Cover Story—Inside Wrestling:** "WrestleMania 21: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

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Vol. 63, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 61: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 64, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 62: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 65, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 63: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 66, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 64: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 67, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 65: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 68, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 66: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 69, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 67: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 70, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 68: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 71, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 69: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 72, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 70: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 73, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 71: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 74, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 72: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 75, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 73: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 76, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 74: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 77, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 75: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 78, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 76: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 79, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 77: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 80, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 78: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 81, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 79: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 82, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 80: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 83, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 81: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 84, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 82: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 85, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 83: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 86, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 84: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 87, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 85: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 88, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 86: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 89, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 87: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 90, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 88: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 91, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 89: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 92, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 90: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 93, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 91: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 94, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 92: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 95, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 93: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 96, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 94: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 97, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 95: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 98, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 96: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 99, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 97: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 100, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 98: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 101, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 99: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 102, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 100: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 103, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 101: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo, Alere Littlefeather, Jeff Hammond, O.C. Boyz, Shawn Michaels.

Vol. 104, 2009: Cover Story—The Wrestler: "WrestleMania 102: The Real Winners & Losers." Also inside: Alex Laree, Lance Hoyt, Shane Twins, Jack Evans, Val Venis, Arch Kincard, Mike Mondo,



June 2009: Frustrated in his war against the Main Event Mafia, Joe joins forces with his arch-rivals. With his new "Nation Of Violence" attitude and the MEM backing him, Joe becomes even more dangerous.

October 2008: To combat the ever-growing Main Event Mafia, Joe and A.J. Styles form the Frontline.

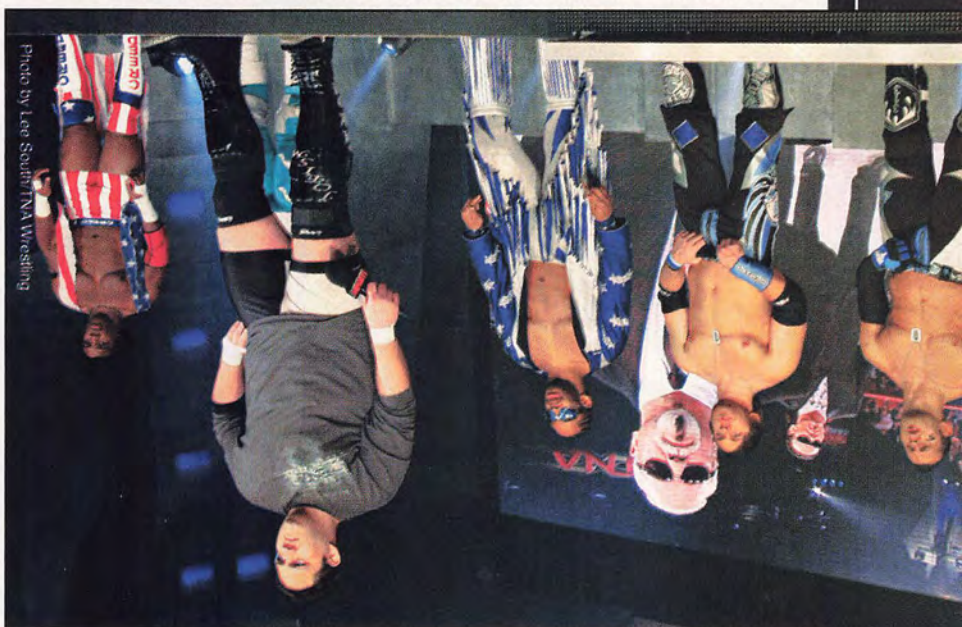


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

injury ... Also began speaking of a "secret adviser" from whom he was taking advice ... Fans were already repulsed by Joe's new savage demeanor by the time he betrayed Styles by helping Angle win the TNA World title in a King of the Mountain match at Slammiversary ... Shortly after, Joe officially joined the Main Event Mafia, vowing to battle alongside the same faction he had spent the better part of the past year fighting against ... Finally revealed his adviser to be Taz, who debuted by helping Joe defeat Sting ... Defeated Homicide at Hard Justice to win his fourth X division title ... Lost belt to the Amazing Red on *Impact* thanks to interference by Bobby Lashley ... Lost to Lashley in a submission match at Bound For Glory due to referee stoppage ... Angle turned fan favorite on the following *Impact*, seemingly disbanding the MEM.

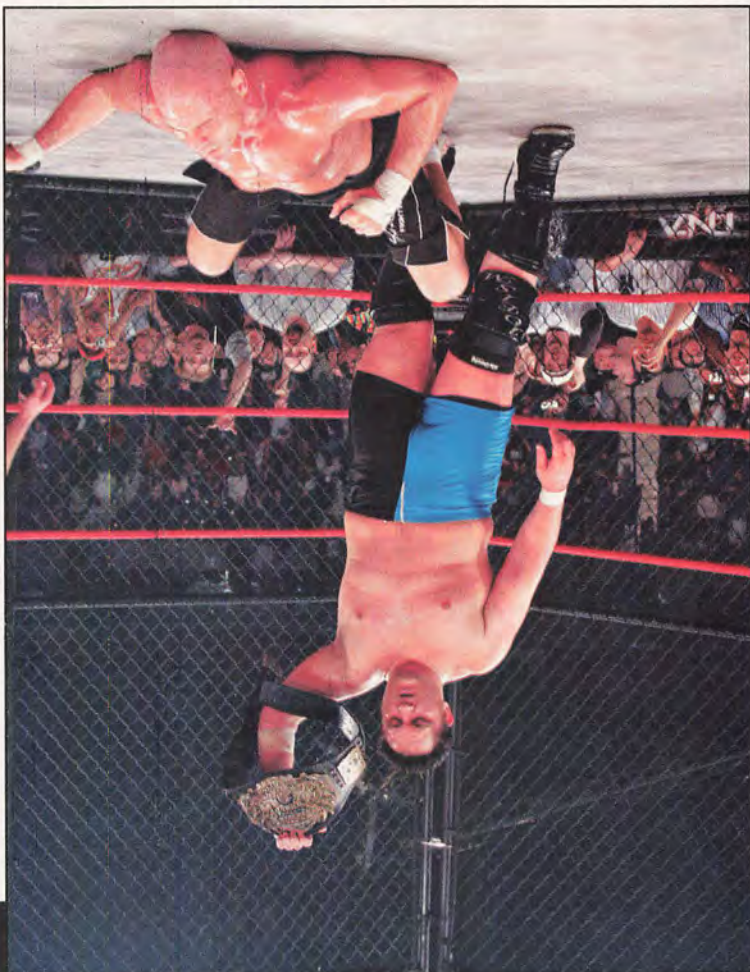


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

April 2008: After a nearly year-long feud that would win PWI Feud of the Year, Samoa Joe finally beats Kurt Angle at Lockdown to capture the TNA World title.

Joe in a tag team match vs. Styles and Tomko at Final Resolution ... Tried to force a backstage confrontation with Nash at the following *Impact*, but Nash insisted he'd only fight Joe for money ... Inexplicably accepted Nash as his mentor ... At Match of Champions, pinned Brother Ray to win the TNA tag team title for himself ... Put the tag and X titles up against Angle's TNA and IWGP championships, but lost due to interference by Karen Angle ... Response for the first blemish on Christian Cage's TNA record, forcing him to tap out to the Coquina Clutch ... Voiced displeasure over his treatment by TNA management, threatening to not renew his contract until he was awarded another shot at Angle ... Finally defeated Angle at Lockdown on April 13, 2008, to win his first TNA World title and become the third man to capture TNA's Triple Crown ... Reign would last 182 days, with Sting taking the title at Bound For Glory IV ... Joined Styles and TNA's Frontline in war against Angle's Main Event Mafia ... Suffered attack by MEM members that would put him out of action for remainder of 2008 ... Sporting new, more violent demeanor, along with a buzz cut hairstyle and tribal face paint upon his return ... Promised that TNA would feel the wrath of his "Nation Of Violence" ... Attacked Scott Steiner several times with a machete, sidelining "Big Poppa Pump" for several weeks with an eye



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

August 2008: Following a no-contest decision at Victory Road, Samoa Joe and Booker T rematch at Hard Justice inside the six sides of steel. With no help from Sting, or anyone else, Joe annihilates Booker with whatever weapons he can reach.

KI), who pinned Sonjay Dutt in a three-way match ... Steiner laid out Joe with a steel chair during the match, intensifying their rivalry ... Beat Jarrett in a Fans' Revenge Lumberjack Match ... Lost to the newly arrived Kurt Angle by submission, thus ending his 18-month undefeated streak ... Defeated Angle in a rematch, also by submission, but fell in the decisive Iron Man match, three falls to two, when the referee failed to see Angle tap to Samoa Joe's anklelock ... Cut an infamous unsolicited promo at Turning Point criticizing Scott Hall for no-showing the event ... Drew the real-life ire of TNA management and Kevin Nash ... Reconciled with Nash after apologizing at a talent meeting the next day ... On screen however, feud with Nash continued after Nash abandoned

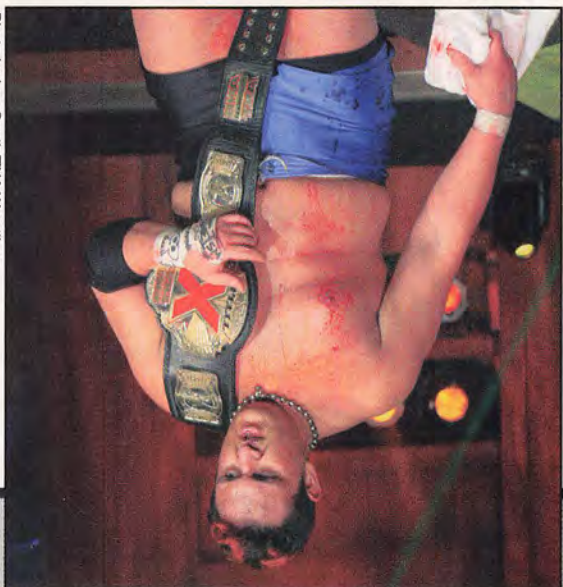
hattan Mayhem ... Officially signed with TNA in June 2005, but continued to compete for ROH and other independent in between TNA bookings ... Made TNA



March 2003: Joe Scheraga beats Xavier to claim the ROH Heavyweight Championship. Joe would hold on to that title for 645 days, making him the longest reigning champ to date.

debut at Slammiversary, destroying Sonjay Dutt ... Lost ROH Pure title to McGuginess after holding it for a mere three months ... After declaring his intention to compete in TNA's X division, defeated Styles in the finals of Christopher Daniels' Invitational Super X Cup with help from Daniels ... TNA officials refused to recognize the title change due to Daniels' interference and ordered a three-way match for the title, which Styles won when he pinned Daniels ... Turned on

Daniels after an eight-man tag match at Genesis ... Would carry around a towel drenched in Daniels' blood for months after ... Defeated Styles to capture the X title at Turning Point ... Defeated Daniels at Final Resolution when Styles threw in the towel for his friend, whom Joe had again bloodied ... Daniels finally got the best of Joe, winning the X title in an Ultimate X match ... Because there was no pinfall or submission recorded, Joe's TNA undefeated streak remained intact ... Undaunted, Joe regained the X title from Daniels in a one-on-one rematch shortly after on the Thursday debut of *Impact* ... Lost to his legendary opponent, Japanese superstar Kenta Kobashi in a dream match in ROH, but his spirited performance solidified his status as one of the toughest wrestlers in the world ... Teamed with longtime rival Low Ki in loss to Kobashi and Homicide the following night ... Took center stage in ROH's feud against Philadelphia hardcore rival Combat Zone Wrestling ... Teamed with B.J. Whitmer and Adam Pearce in humiliating loss to the CZW contingent of Chris Hero, Super Dragon, and Necro Butcher at ROH's 100th show ... Represented ROH in a five-on-five Cage of Death match against CZW at Death Before Dishonor IV ... In a shocking display, was taken out by teammate Bryan Danielson, then-



December 2005: After battling Christopher Daniels for many months, Joe sets his sights on and captures A.J. Styles' X division title. The "Samoa Submission Machine" could be seen carrying both the title and a towel drenched in Daniels' blood for months to come.

ROH champion, when he attempted to soften Joe up for a future match between the two ... ROH won the match and the feud against CZW, despite Joe being carried out of the arena before the finish ... Danielson's strategy proved successful, as the weakened Joe could not take the title from the "American Dragon," despite multiple opportunities ... Back in TNA, partnered with Sting to defeat Jeff Jarrett and Scott Steiner ... Agreed to watch



March 2006: Samoa Joe is named *Pro Wrestling Illustrated's* Most Popular Wrestler of the Year by the fans.



[THE WRESTLER]

SAMOA JOE

SPOTLIGHT

SAMOA JOE

BORN IN ORANGE County, California, on March 17, 1979 ... Raised mainly in Huntington Beach ... Family also spent time in Ewa Beach, Hawaii ... Family founded traveling Polynesian Dance Troupe called Tiare Productions ... Made on-stage debut performing at opening ceremonies of the 1984 Olympic Summer Games in Los Angeles

at age five ... Attend-

ed Ocean View High

School, where he

earned all-league

honors in football ...

Also became Califor-

nia State Junior Judo

champion ... Worked

for a brief time as a

mortgage broker ...

With dream of becom-

ing a pro wrestler, at-

tended UIWA West

Coast Dojo ... Be-

came center's first

graduate, training un-

der Cincinnati Red,

Johnny Hemp, and

John Delayo ... Made

pro debut against

"Uncle" Jess Hansen

in December of 1999,

just three months af-

ter entering the dojo

... Signed with then-

WWF developmental

affiliate Ultimate Pro

Wrestling (UPW) ...

Befriended and also

feuded with John

Cena ... Made an ap-

pearance on WWF

Jakked, against Essa

Rios ... Teamed with Mike Knox to defeat Al Katrazz and

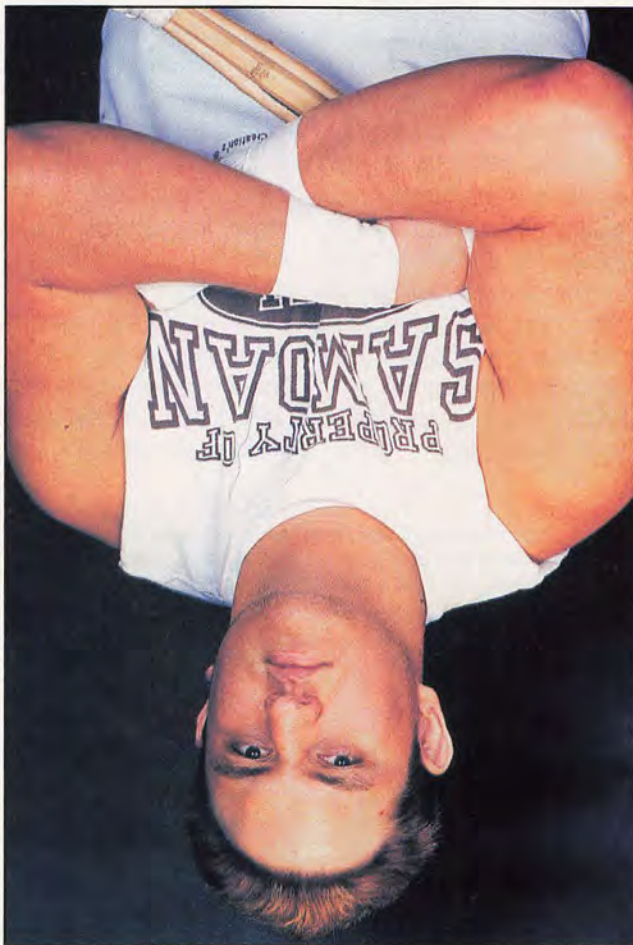
Basil at UPW Proving Ground ... Defeated Christopher

Daniels in early-2001 to win the UPW heavyweight title

... Became company's longest-reigning champion, hold-

ing the title for more than 10 months before losing it to

Mikey Henderson ... Traveled to Japan to wrestle for Pro



March 2000: Joe begins working for then-WWE developmental promotion UPW. He would eventually become the longest reigning UPW heavyweight champion ever.

King Joe, but left Zero-1 after refusing to take on a more gimmicky character ... Back in the States, de-buted for Southern Califor-nia-based Pro Wrestling Guerrilla ... Feuded most notably with Super Dragon ... Made ROH debut in 2002 at glory By Honor as Christopher Daniels' hired assassin ... Failed in his mission to take out Low Ki, but made big impression on fans and company man-agement ... Quickly climbed up the ranks of contenders ... Split with Daniels' Prophecy group, ultimately defeating Xavier to become the third ROH champion on March 23, 2003 ... Would go on to become longest-reigning champion in company his-tory, turning back the chal-lenges of Daniels, Homi-cide, Paul London, A.J. Styles, Doug Williams, and Bryan Danielson, among others ... Engaged in an epic trilogy of matches against C.M. Punk ... The first two went to 60-minute time-limit draws, before Joe finally defeated Punk in his final defense ... Was caught by Austin Arles at Final Battle '04, losing the ROH title after 645 days ... Since then, only Nigel McGuinness' 545-day reign came close to matching Joe's feat ... Rebounded by defeating pro-tegé Jay Lethal for the ROH Pure championship at Man-

But is this a good thing? Giving fans so much to do away from their seats may only minimize the time they spend in them—making for smaller crowds cheering on wrestlers and inspiring them to deliver a more memorable performance.

WWE's debut at the Prudential Center may have not only marked a new chapter for WWE, but perhaps the beginning of the end of an old one.

WWE only finalized plans to hold Hell in a Cell in Newark after canceling plans to hold another October pay-per-view at the nearby Izod Center in East Rutherford. Formerly the Meadowlands. Today, the Izod Center has given way to the spanking new Prudential Center in Newark as the state's main WWE arena.



In what was advertised as Bruno Sammartino's retirement match in October 1981, the two-time former WWF World champion defeated long-time rival George "The Animal" Steele in New Jersey's Meadowlands. Today, the Izod Center has given way to the spanking new Prudential Center in Newark as the state's main WWE arena.

the building on the grounds of the Meadowlands Sports Complex had been the exclusive Northern New Jersey home of WWE since the building opened in 1981. In the first card ever held in the building, Bruno Sammartino took on George "The Animal" Steele in the main event. But, just as the Prudential Center lured the New Jersey Devils hockey franchise from the Meadowlands, it appears it may be doing the same for WWE. While WWE is scheduled to run a show in Meadowlands in December, one has to think that the Prudential Center will replace the Izod Center during WWE's regular tours of the Northeast. The building is newer, has more amenities, and is more easily accessible by public transportation.

And so, the building that hosted the second-ever *Saturday Night's Main Event* and the second-ever SummerSlam may soon become second best for WWE. As exciting as a brand new sporting arena can be for a city, there's certainly something bittersweet about saying goodbye to so many buildings that have housed so much great wrestling history. That's especially the case here in the New York metro area, what historically has been the biggest market for the biggest wrestling company in history.

The Meadowlands isn't the only WWE landmark in pany in history.

The storied stadium is now a parking lot. But, alas, change is sometimes good. And while we should hold on to the great memories we have from wrestling's most historic venues, we should also embrace the all the fresh memories being made at its newest ones. With just one event in the record books, the Prudential Center can already lay claim to having hosted two world title changes. That's twice as many as the Meadowlands ever did.

W O R K I N' F I F F

BY AL CASTLE

A FEW RECENT trips to some live WWE shows in my area have gotten me thinking about some of the places where we watch wrestling, when we're lucky enough to do so outside of our homes. It inspired me to write this installment of "Workin' Stiff."

Please take your seats.

True to the name of this column, I am, indeed, a blue-collar wrestling fan. As such, while I've probably attended more than 200 wrestling shows in my life, I have never once sat in the front row.

As appealing as it is to be within arm's reach of the sport's biggest superstars, I have never in good conscience been able to part with the hundreds of dollars it would cost for a couple hours' worth of prime ringside real estate—even if you do get to keep a commemorative chair.

And so, when a WWE live event, television taping, or pay-per-view comes to a local arena, you could usually

find me sitting in a three-digit section that begins with a "3." And I do so proudly, as do the other members of the Nosebleed Wrestling Fans Club.

We are a select breed. We appreciate the unique thrill of attending a wrestling event in person rather than watching it from home—even if we end up staring at one of the arena's big screens all night anyway. We love the thrill of being a part of history, and love it more when we could do so without spending a fortune. We realize that you don't need to spend \$300 to be able to say, "I was there when (insert historic wrestling moment here) took place." And above all, we love the atmosphere.

While the marquee might read "Wrestling," we know that the product in the ring is only part of the performance. The real attraction, very often, is the audience—its passion and its indifference; its cheers and its boos. There's nothing like sharing a good match with 10,000 of your closest friends.

And when you're there to take in everything around you, there is no such thing as a bad seat. But if there is such a thing as a bad seat, I'm pretty sure I sat in it when I attended October's Hell in A Cell event at the newly constructed Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey.

With my back resting against one of the walls of the spacious arena, and the ring just a tiny speck far below me, I was quite literally in the worst seat in the house. But, in the lavish new arena, loaded with amenities at every turn, not being able to see the ring didn't mean I didn't have plenty to see.

"The Rock," as the Prudential Center is often referred to, is one of the most recent examples of a trend sweeping the entire country. Cities and sports teams everywhere are building state-of-the-art new venues to replace their aging ones. And just like the jealous neighbor trying to keep up with the Joneses, the game of one-upmanship among arena developers is afoot.

You have a sports bar inside your arena? Well, we'll build three. The new Yankee Stadium opened in the spring with a 500-square-foot hi-def video screen. A few months later, Cowboys Stadium opened with a 2,500-foot one.

Gift shops, museums, steak houses, you name it. A wrestling fan attending a show in a newly built venue can keep himself occupied for hours before ever showing his ticket to an usher.

For most WWE fans, it's not about where you sit, it is just being in the building that is the real thrill. For Contributing Writer Al Castle, the main reason for sitting in the nosebleed section is just to be around other blue-collar wrestling fans, and save some cash!

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tional championship belt. From such juvenile horseplay sprung forth a desire to become a full-time wrestler.

A few years later, at the age of 16, Haste enrolled with Storm and went full bore into training for his career on the mat. The decision came much to the disappointment of his parents, who, despite not blocking the idea completely, made it clear that he would have to continue his regular schooling while also working a part-time job. Over time, as they took note of his undying passion, they reluctantly accepted the inevitable. "To this day, my mom still will not watch my matches," chuckled Haste. "But I think she's still very thrilled, if not a little worried, after viewing the movie *The Wrestler*."

While at home in Perth, Haste frequently does work for LocoTV, a TV and Internet travel channel, in order to improve his ability on the microphone. "Usually when I go out to the ring, I'm that cheery, albeit quiet, fan favorite that the crowd just loves to get behind and root on to victory," he said.

"Working with the TV station gives me the opportunity to practice refining my verbal ability on the mike, to complement all the physical practice I get working out in the ring."

Haste's interest in production doesn't end with wrestling. He would love to try his hand at branching out into acting roles when his body begins to break down and he can no longer be so active in the ring. For the immediate future, however, Shane Haste's biggest goal is to catch the eye of WWE executives and become a top international star on one of the promotion's three brands. "I'm not going to be so naive as to say that there's a good chance I'll definitely end up with WWE some day," concluded Haste, "because that is almost every wrestler's dream. I just feel that I have a lot to offer wrestling fans, and would love to be able to show that off on the largest stage possible.

One wrestling insider who feels that entertaining

Shane Haste lands a kick to the mid-section of Sonny Roselli in a recent NWA match. Those who've seen Haste in the ring believe he'd fit nicely in either WWE or TNA.

such lofty ambitions is anything but naïve is NWA promoter David Marquez, who has watched countless matches featuring Haste.

"After watching Shane all this time, I can tell you with full confidence that Shane Haste is the real deal. I can easily see him competing in WWE or TNA within the next six months."

That's quite an opinion, especially coming from an informed observer like Marquez. But ever true to the surfer image, Haste seems to handle the pressure of high expectations in stride.

"If nothing else comes from all of this work I've been doing, then I'd have to say that I'm still happy, with my wildest dreams fulfilled. I love the attention that wrestling in Perth has brought me, and I love doing the NWA showcases I've had the chance to recently do. What more could a young Western Aussie want?"

□



Photo By Scott Finkelshein

As a child, Haste did not have aspirations to perfect Japanese wrestling moves. He actually grew up watching WCW in his living room, mostly just rolling around with his close friends as he competed for his own title.

face, rather than using a knee as Punk does. using the GTFQ, he actually kicks his opponent in the GTS move popularized in WWE by C.M. Punk). When splash and patented GTFQ (a modified version of the KENTA, one of his favorites, with his top rope frog see the inspiration provided by Japanese wrestler move set. Watching one of Haste's matches, one can ing more flying maneuvers to his already extensive helped him improve on his high-impact repertoire, add-

If nothing else, Haste's time training in the U.S. has learned upon coming to the U.S." "My experiences in America have been good, if not brutal on the body," recounted Haste, who has experienced bruises, sprains, and strains like nothing he could have imagined. "Still, I've enjoyed wrestling full-time, traveling to new places, and learning so much from some of the best wrestlers in the business. In particular, on my actual wrestling style. That might be the biggest—and most physically demanding—lesson I've learned upon coming to the U.S."

certain element of very hard work involved. world to learn from such mat masters, there is also a dream-come-true just to travel halfway around the to the more knowledgeable wrestling fan, it might seem such as the NWA and Pro Wrestling Guerrilla. And while, Danielson—while touring with American promotions ters in the world—men such as London and Bryan against, and picking the brains of some of the top wrestlers in the world—men such as London and Bryan David Storm, Haste has been traveling with, competing At the recommendation of his trainer and friend Perth's Explosive Pro Wrestling and NWA Perth.

Of course, it has not all been fun in the sun for the 24-year-old Haste, who is now in his sixth year as a professional wrestler, and a regular competitor for what a real beach is like.

show Paul London (and other newly made friends), just tling in California—would love nothing more than to recently returned from a second three-month stint wrestling in the NWA. In fact, the 6'2", 215-pound Aussie—having body board, as cutting right through his competition in rough surf of Australia's western shores on his just as soon be found cutting through the

NATIVE OF Perth, Australia, Shane Haste could

SHANE HASTE

INTRODUCING



COUNTERPOINT:

TNA'S CREDIBILITY WOULD BE HURT IF IT DOESN'T MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO

BY BRADY HICKS

DEPENDING ON YOUR point of view, TNA has been either progressive or foolishly aggressive in its approach to pay-per-view marketing. Regardless, decisions have been made, for better or worse. The company now must continually maximize the effectiveness of its 12-show strategy.

There really is no other alternative, and here's why: As much flak as TNA gets from those who claim that its management mimics everything WWE does, imagine how its reputation would take a dive if it were to cut back now.

Whether TNA is effectively "competing" with WWE on the PPV front isn't the issue here. Sometimes, perception is the key. And TNA has, at least, managed to carve out its own niche. It can be argued that events such as Lockdown, the first ever all-steel-cage-match show, prompted WWE to respond with similar concepts over the past year, such as Hell in a Cell and Breaking Point.

The mere fact that some wrestling pundits are discussing this completely justifies TNA's approach. It also amplifies the sentiment that Dixie Carter and company can't afford to mess with the status quo.

TNA has always set the bar high and has pushed itself as a viable alternative to WWE. Don't forget that the company held weekly PPVs for the first 2½ years of its existence. Many experts predicted TNA would be out of business shortly after it debuted, but seven years later, it's still going strong.

When the weekly PPV concept was abandoned in favor of regular three-hour shows in the fall of 2004, it was viewed as the next step in the company's evolution. Since then, TNA has inched closer to the WWE model of PPV presentation. Any deviation from the plan now would be an admission of failure to its fans. Even worse, it would provide fuel for TNA's persistent detractors.

All of this isn't to say that the concept of holding 12 PPVs a year is perfectly sound. TNA does struggle when it comes to brand recognition, and only a handful of its stars truly qualify as "household" names of the wrestling landscape. But several things can be done to enhance the current set-up.

Rather than reduce the number of PPVs, TNA must

look to further define why each one should be considered special. Lockdown and Destination X have self-explanatory titles. Slammiversary does as well, but the company could do more to promote it and Bound For Glory as the mega-shows they want them to be.

As for the rest, TNA needs to be creative. Why not give No Surrender a submission match theme? Maybe Hard Justice could include a special referee for each match or Sacrifice could feature at least a main event where the participants all put something important to them on the line.

Then, yes, there is that concept that always seems to work—lowering the cost to buy each PPV. While reducing the number of shows would reflect negatively on the company's growth, cutting the price to watch would undoubtedly be met with enthusiasm and more buys.

While it's true that WWE has the luxury of playing off the history and prestige of its classic PPV events, remember that TNA is also building toward the future. Perhaps 10-15 years from now, Bound For Glory, Against All Odds, and Sacrifice will be on the tip of every wrestling fan's tongue.

While TNA could certainly be doing more to sell its annual lineup of shows, it simply can't afford to scale back its aggressive game plan now.

Brady Hicks is a contributing writer for The Wrestler.

□



Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Though TNA has some hokey pay-per-views, dropping some from the schedule would only make the company look weak compared to WWE. Contributing Writer Brady Hicks thinks it is the off-the-wall PPV like Lockdown that help keep TNA in the minds of fans.

POINT: TNA SHOULD REDUCE ITS NUMBER OF PPVS

BY AL ALVEN

SOMETIMES, LESS REALLY is more.

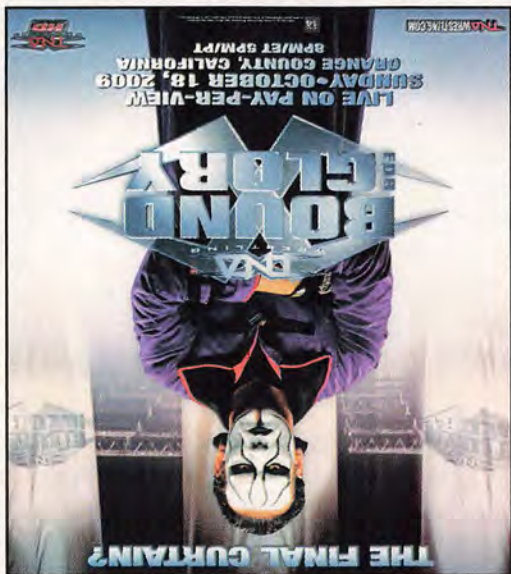
For a long time, WWE (then the WWF), the pioneer of pay-per-view broadcast in the wrestling industry, ran four big shows a year. First, of course, was *WrestleMania*—the “Granddaddy Of Them All.” Eventually, *SummerSlam* was added, along with two other PPVs with gimmick-match hooks: *Survivor Series* and *The Royal Rumble*.

The four-PPV formula worked so well for a variety of reasons. The most obvious benefit was the spacing of time between these events, which not only allowed for ample buildup and anticipation, but also helped each develop a certain prestige of its own.

Each show flowed into the other, and, really, not much has changed since then. Vince McMahon has added monthly PPVs to fill in the blanks between these major events, and has tweaked the format of each show over the years.

But, generally the “Big Four” remain highlights of the yearly wrestling calendar. Unfortunately, TNA can’t say the same about any of the shows on its annual roster of PPV events.

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



Though TNA may run too many shows for contributing Writer Al Alven, he does agree that *Bound For Glory* is one that shouldn’t go anywhere. The company’s biggest PPV of the year is a mainstay in wrestling when October comes.

Resolution (December) could serve as bookends on the PPV schedule. There are any number of ways that TNA could approach a reshuffling plan, but the bottom line is that reducing the number of PPVs would greatly benefit TNA in both the short- and long-term. Running 12 PPVs a year strains the talent, the fan base, and, most importantly, the creative potential of the company.

Al Alven is a contributing writer for The Wrestler.

Even more importantly, the remaining six shows could be given twice as much attention and hype. Storylines would not have to be rushed, and marquee matches could be treated with greater reverence.

Gimmick-reliant shows like *Destination X* and *Lockdown* would not have to be run on back-to-back months, as they currently are, in March and April.

Slammiversary (June) and *Bound For Glory* (October) could remain the signature shows, while *Genesis* (January) and *Final Resolution* (December) could serve as bookends on the PPV schedule.

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THUMBS DOWN

Thumbs Down to Lacey Von Erich. The daughter of Kerry Von Erich has made very few friends in TNA since thrusting herself into Angelina Love's position within The Beautiful People. Even though the elegant Lacey is a natural fit for the group, one has to wonder what she had to gain by verbally trashing the defenseless Love, who was released from the company because of visa problems. Lacey's first time with a TNA microphone could have been spent telling

the fans more about who she is, since not everyone is aware. Instead, she chose to kick a woman who was already down

Thumbs Down to Michael Cole. The Raw announcer made an absolute jerk of himself at *Smackdown's* 10th Anniversary special, loudly making fun of himself and his tendency to refer to "Vintage [insert wrestler's name here]." In the future, Cole might be wise to not be so eager to call attention to his own shortcomings as an announcer, and instead focus on reinforcing all of the positive traits he shows while calling the action each Monday night.

After all, his talent has gotten him this far.



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Thumbs Down to Daniels. To a casual fan who is fed nothing but a steady stream of TNA Ultimate X matches, it would appear that Daniels has a death wish. At Bound for Glory, Daniels once again defied the odds by falling from 15 feet above, just barely avoiding landing on his head and, in all likelihood, seriously injuring himself. Unfortunately, Daniels has no X title to show for this tremendous stunt. What he does have is a separated shoulder, and a reputation that his next Ultimate X match could be his last.

Thumbs Down to Triple H. In spite of how popular Triple H is while teaming with Shawn Michaels each week on *Raw*, one has to question if he did not get a little carried away with a recent promo, running down Drew McIntyre and Eric Escobar, two up-and-comers from *Smackdown* he was slated to face as part of his Bragging Rights seven-on-seven match. Sure, Triple H wants to convey a certain confidence that he can beat anyone in WWE. What he did in this case, however, was cut down two of his young, promising WWE peers, before giving the fans any chance to decide for themselves how talented they truly are.

□

Photo by Matt Roberts

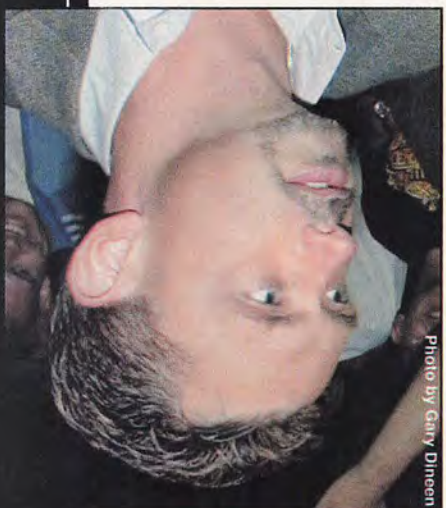


Photo by Gary Dineen

THUMBS UP

Thumbs Up to A.J. Styles. As the TNA World champion, Styles faced a lot of pressure at Bound for Glory. After all, not only did he feel compelled to defend his title against Sting—TNA's most popular and experienced wrestler—but the match was potentially Sting's last, and was to take place before a clearly partisan crowd in his hometown of Los Angeles. Styles deserves recognition not just for cleanly defeating Sting (on the biggest date on TNA's calendar, no less), but for the class he showed by then calling him back to the ring and allowing him to close out the show, addressing his fans.

Thumbs Up to The Miz. For the second straight issue, The Miz deserves recognition with a "thumbs up." When he first promised he was going to dethrone Kofi Kingston and win the U.S. title, more than a few Raw fans had to be chuckling to themselves. After all, The Miz had made—and failed to deliver on—many bold pledges since joining the brand earlier in 2009. In clearly pinning Kingston on Raw, however, The Miz forced viewers to actually take notice, proving that he was much more than just a series of empty, meaningless promises. He actually backed up his words with some action for a change.

Thumbs Up to Eddie Edwards. Even though some may not be a fan of some of the tactics Edwards employs in the ring, we have to admire his ability to withstand pain. Less than 24 hours after suffering a broken elbow in a free-for-all fight with Kevin Steen, Edwards, alongside American Wolves partner Davey Richards, found himself back in the ring in New York City, successfully defending the Ring of Honor tag title against Steen and El Generico. Even though his damaged elbow would require surgery after the match, Edwards quickly announced he would battle through the injury and continue defending the title.

Thumbs Up to Christian. Sometimes, in a large family, it can be tough for a younger, smaller brother to get any sort of respect from his older siblings, at least without a fight. Unfortunately, as the flag-bearer for ECW, Christian finds himself in this position each week, as ECW is continually passed over by WWE matchmakers. What Christian needed was an opportunity to show he was on equal footing with all WWE stars, and this is why he needed to cleanly pin Smackdown invader Chris Jericho on a recent edition of *ECW On Syfy*. It has been quite a while since Christian faced an opponent with the experience and ability of Jericho, but that did not stop him from doing ECW proud.



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



Photo by Joe Zanolle



Photo by George Tahinos



The Monster Factory became the most famous wrestling school in the country, spawning countless imitators. Through the years, stars like Bigelow, The Big Show, Tony Atlas, Tatanaka, Raven, D-Lo Brown, and many more came out of The Monster Factory. Current ECW standout Sheamus is another Monster Factory alumnus.

In the mid-1990s, Sharpe was diagnosed with leukemia and he hired Atlas to run the school in his absence. Sharpe was so impressed with the way Atlas conducted business that he has kept him ever since. Former ECW referee Molineaux oversees the daily business operations.

"I think the reason that The Monster Factory has been around this long is because we're honest people," Molineaux said. "We're not here to steal people's money, or say that everyone can be a wrestler. Not everyone can be a wrestler. We get some kids who come in thinking that because they've bounced around on a trampoline somewhere that they're a wrestler. We're honest about their abilities."

"We're one of the few schools that turns people away if we don't believe someone has what it takes," said Atlas, who says he focuses his training on time-tested fundamentals and old-fashioned, old-school wrestling, which is what he features with his promotion, Old Time Wrestling.

"Things are different today. It's not like the old days in Memphis where you'd be wrestling Ricky Morton every night for a month and learning so much along the way," he said. "Today, you're wrestling Johnny Sublicase one night a month. You don't get those opportunities to learn by working with veteran guys every night. That's what we try to provide."

One of the most noticeable changes with the school is the appearance of its students. "Twenty-five years ago we attracted a lot of big, huge bodybuilders, right out of the gym, that wanted to get into wrestling," Sharpe said. "Today, the students are smaller, younger, and more athletic."

Atlas says that one of his proudest moments as a trainer came after his student, John "Tank" Toland returned to the school after participating in a WWE tryout.

"He told me he went to the test knowing the answers," Atlas said. "That was the best. He went into that camp and already had his fundamentals down and was far ahead of

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The wrestling business has changed dramatically over the past 25 years. Entire promotions have come and gone during that time period. It's a true testament to the work of Sharpe, Atlas, and Molineaux that their school has managed to evolve with the times and keep in business, especially after the market was flooded with other schools as wrestling was deregulated by state athletic commissions, allowing just about anyone with a homemade ring to open a so-called school.

"We're not extravagant. From Larry on down, we operate with honesty and integrity," Atlas said. "There are no guarantees in wrestling. Hell, even Ric Flair can't get his kid a guaranteed job. But we make sure our students are prepared and have their fundamentals down to give them the best opportunity they can get."

I once asked a former WWE star what was the most important virtue of a wrestler. Was it athleticism, or timing, or marketability, or some intangible attribute? He responded immediately: longevity. The Monster Factory has proven itself through its longevity. Here's to another 25 years of monster-making.

Another "monster" to come out of the factory can be found weekly on ECW. Sheamus, the 6'6", 272-pounder, is just another of Sharpe's trainees to make it to the big federation.



ON ASSISTMENT

AS AN EDITORIAL guideline, we tend to shy away from writing about wrestling schools because we don't want to give an implied third-party endorsement of one particular school over another. But Larry Sharpe's Monster Factory has reached an impressive milestone that I consider to be newsworthy. In 2009, The Monster Factory celebrated its 25th anniversary. The world-renowned school has had its share of ups and downs through the years, but Sharpe, head trainer Ed Atlas, and manager Jim Molineaux have managed to keep the doors open for a quarter of a century. That's pretty darn impressive.

"Our training classes are scheduled for Wednesday through Saturday, so we shut things down Sunday and were ready in the new location by Wednesday."

Today, though Sharpe is largely removed from the day-to-day operations, he remains the public face of the school (which is located in Bellmawr, New Jersey) and the man most associated with the wrestling school that has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Sports Illustrated*.

Sharpe became one of wrestling's most visible—and controversial—characters in the 1980s, particularly when he opposed Vince McMahon as McMahon pushed for the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board to deregulate pro wrestling. Always outspoken and quick with a quote, "Pretty Boy" became a media mainstay.

Sharpe retired from wrestling in 1983 and partnered with former NWA and WWWF champion Buddy Rogers to open a wrestling school. When Rogers decided to remove himself from the project and move to Florida a short time later, Sharpe found himself trying to come up with a name for his school.

"Back then, Killer Kowalski had his school, and while there were just a few schools out there, they were usually named after someone like Kowalski or Rogers," Sharpe told me. "With Buddy out, I was sitting there, looking at Bam Bam Bigelow and some of the other guys I was training at the time and thought to myself, *Look at all the monsters around here*. That's where I got the name."

With its unorthodox name, Sharpe's marketing prowess, and the popularity explosion of wrestling in the mid-1980s,

Larry Sharpe was very instrumental in starting Bam Bam Bigelow's career. It was giants like Bigelow that helped Sharpe find a name for his wrestling school. The Monster Factory.



Regardless, I couldn't hate him. I didn't want to hate him. Of course, it never dawned on me at such a young age that Albano was merely portraying a character. The business was different then, and even if it hadn't been, I was so giddy over this new, "personal" relationship I had with the man, I would never have surrendered it to mere logic or fact.

And so, I became South Philly's number-one apologist for Lou Albano. No matter what he did or said, I was always prepared to shut down his detractors with a quick and convincing, "You know, Capt. Lou is actually a very nice guy."

"How do you know?" my adversary would ask.

"Because I met him and we talked about Bruno Sammartino." See I was a smart mark years before the term came into vogue.

But by the time Albano went on to reach even greater heights in wrestling and beyond, I was in my teens and interested in other things, like football, music, and girls. Even when I came to work here at Kappa in 1997, I didn't really think much of the impact Albano had on me in my childhood. But looking back at those days now, exactly how great Albano was at what he did is abundantly evident.

In an era when men like Albano had little but their bodies and minds with which to connect to fans, I have to admit, Capt. Lou worked me like the great, old pro he was.

Three Of A Perfect Pair. I love pro

wrestling. I love mixed martial arts. However, I'm not so sure how I feel about the cross-pollination that's going on between them.

Unlike some fans, I'm not so quick to lump both disciplines (nor boxing) under the singular umbrella of combat sports. Two are sanctioned competitions. The other is sports-entertainment.

And that's why I'm not all that pleased to see the Tara-Kim Couture conflict resolved in a six-sided ring. Given their recent war of words, which may or may not have been sincere, I would've preferred to see them clash in The Octagon.

Maybe it's the boxing fan in me, but I'm convinced nobody (myself included) would regard a wrestling match as the definitive outcome of their feud.

Also, a pro wrestling match puts Tara in a no-win situation: If she loses to Couture, she looks doubly foolish for dropping one to an outsider. If she wins, well, what's the big deal? She's supposed to beat an outsider.

Tara, who recently had a pull-apart with MMA athlete Kim Couture, will most likely face off against her in TNA, much to Krewda's disappointment.

Plus, if Tara were to overcome Couture in an eight-sided cage, we wouldn't have to hear anymore gloating that pro wrestlers can't hack it in MMA because "it ain't that fake crap!"

Ever notice, by the way, how nobody seems to say that about Brock Lesnar anymore?

□

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



As surly and unpredictable as Lou Albano could be in the ring, a very young Frank Krewda recalls witnessing an entirely different side of Albano when he was around fans.



this cute, little (this was 1976, remember) blond-haired, On the walk home, I wondered how Albano knew ... and he's Italian."

"Bruno is a very powerful man, and a very good wrestler earlier that day on TV. Instead, he said in *sotto voce*, erupt into the grumbling madman I had just watched When I replied, "Bruno Sammartino!" Albano didn't and asking who my favorite wrestler was.

signed his name before patting me on the head, smiling, the issue into one of the Captain's puffy mitts, and he As the crowd around Albano thinned out, I worked August 1975, in my outstretched hand.

and Rodz was the dog-eared copy of *Inside Wrestling*, Albano, I quickly realized the only thing between me With the crowd swarming to both praise and jeer Saturday evening in 1976.

exited the Philadelphia Spectrum after a card one chilly the way they were mobbing the Captain as both men that was only because the fans weren't mobbing Rodz an autograph for me. Johnny Rodz was the first, but

Capt. Lou was the second wrestler to ever sign share a personal reflection with you.

coverage in this issue, I nevertheless feel compelled to though we went justifiably heavy on the Capt. Lou **The Guiding Light Shines No More.** Even

at the same time, Albano's behavior that day did At the same time, Albano's behavior that day did pique my curiosity. As a fan of Bruno's, I was supposed to despise Albano and his stable of wrestlers. After all, he was the man who guided Ivan Koloff (note the absence of pejoratives when describing Koloff. The other 50 percent of my blood is Russian) to ending Bruno's seven-plus-year title reign in 1971. He'd also interfered in countless matches and insulted—on TV and in print—just about every fan favorite that showed up in a WWF ring. How can he be so crummy sometimes and so nice at other times? I wondered.

Bruno briefly on the phone as an adult in my role here had and never would—even though I would speak to wrestler (and fellow Italian) Bruno Sammartino, never Albano connected that day, in a way me and my favorite with him. Somehow, in my pre-pubescent mind, me and bedroom wall, and after the experience, I felt a kinship Regardless, as I taped Albano's autograph to my was and still is home to a large Italian population.

most. Or maybe he just took a shot in the dark. After all, the Spectrum was located deep in South Philly, which figured, Albano could spot a fellow compadre better than through his veins. Maybe, being an Italian himself, I blue-eyed boy had 50 percent Italian blood coursing

BY FRANK KREWDA

KREW - CUTS

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Photo by Mike Lano

B.J. Race, seen here with husband Harley, passed away in early October due to pneumonia complications. Mrs. Race, a key member in both World League Wrestling and the Cauliflower Alley Club, will be greatly missed by many in the wrestling community.

defeating **Prince Nana**, **Quiet Storm**, and **Tomaso Ciampa** along the way. Nick wasn't the only Logan celebrating; his brothers, **Bryan** and **Matt**, won a tag team battle royal to earn a shot at ECWA tag team

champions **Frankie** and **Alex Arion**. The Logan brothers went on to beat The Arion Brothers to win the tag title.

ROH favorite **Tyler Black** won the 2009 Survival of the Fittest Tournament, beating **Kenny King** to qualify for the match and then outlasting **Golt Cabana**, **Claudio Castagnoli**, **Roderick Strong**, **Delirious**, and **Chris Hero** to win the event. The win reaffirms Black's position as the top threat to **Austin Arles'** championship.

Though she's only been on the TNA roster for a few weeks, **Lacey Von Erich** is proving to be one of the most controversial Knockouts in the company. The second-generation star ripped former Knockouts champion **Angelina Love** in an interview with *The Miami Herald*, claiming "nobody really missed her that much" after Love had been released from the company and that Love "wasn't a good fit" for **The Beautiful People**. Von Erich backpedaled on those remarks days later on Twitter, claiming Love "was amazing in the Beautiful People," but it certainly looks like Von Erich will be in for a major catfight once Love gets her visa issues cleared up.

Both Love and Von Erich will have their



hands full with **Jamie D**, who recently told The Wrestler she's planning a return to TNA in early-2010. The one-time Knockout competed as Sarela in TNA after winning a 2004 Gut Check Challenge. While bouncing around several independent promotions, Jamie was approached by former WWF World champion **Superstar Billy Graham**, who offered to guide her back to national prominence.

Smackdown color commentator **Jim Ross** was taken off the road after suffering his third attack of Bell's palsy on October 20. The condition affects muscles on one side of the face and can cause facial paralysis and vision problems. At press time, no timeline has been set for Ross' return. On his blog (firstbarbq.com/blog), Ross announced that **Matt Striker** and **Todd Grisham** will handle the **Smackdown** announcing duties until he can return.

Finally, a bit of sad news to report. **Beverly Ann "B.J." Race**, the wife of **Harley Race**, passed away on October 9. B.J. had been active in Race's World League Wrestling promotion and the Harley Race Wrestling Academy, as well as the Cauliflower Alley Club. B.J. was well respected and beloved by those who knew her, and was considered by many young wrestlers to be like a second mother. She was 60 years old.

For the first time in four years, Sting did not leave Bound For Glory with the TNA World title. Though Styles came out on top, he allowed Sting to share the limelight by giving "Stinger" a chance to say what might be his final farewell to the fans of California.

partner, the reigning Intercontinental champion,

John Morrison.

While on the subject of successful title defenses,

A.J. Styles scored one of the biggest wins of his

career with a clean victory over **Sting** at Bound for

Glory. Though there had been considerable specula-

tion that BFG could be Sting's final match, Sting did

not announce his retirement after the bout, telling

the fans he wished he could stay forever.

In another interesting Bound for Glory note, **Tara**

(who was challenging for the knockouts title in a

three-way involving **ODB** and **Awesome Kong**) got

involved in a skirmish with MMA fighter **Kim Coutu-**

the ex-wife of **Randy Couture**. Tara and Couture had

been exchanging barbs through Facebook and

Twitter, but the situation became physical in Irvine,

California, prompting security to get involved.

"I felt a shove behind me. At first I thought, Was

that a fan or what? because they're not supposed to

touch us at all," Tara said after the incident. "I turned

around ... and I just went after her ... I'm a very

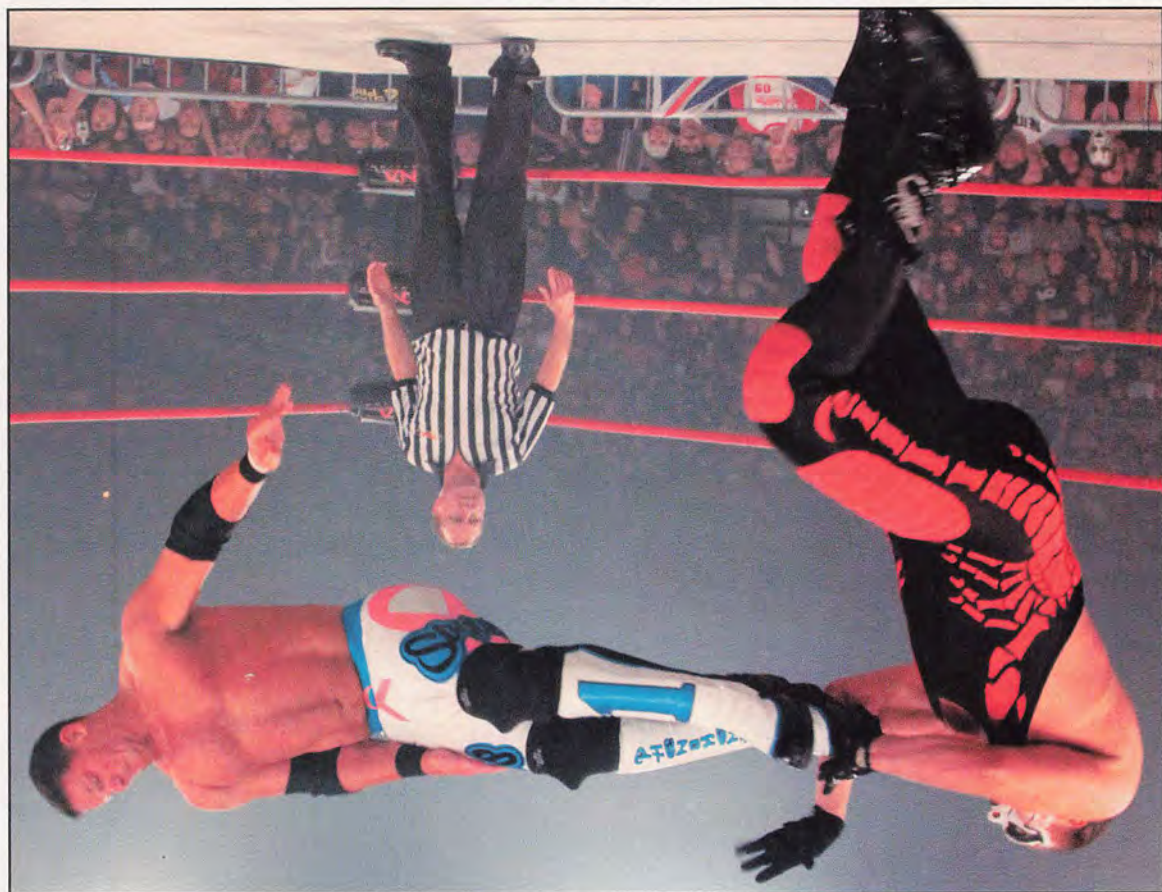


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

friendly person, but you just don't invade my space. You just don't put your hands on me."

Former Ring of Honor champion **Nigel**

McGuinness made a surprise TNA debut on the

October 22 edition of *Impact*. Though it had been

widely reported that McGuinness had left ROH for

WWE, he showed up in TNA as **Desmond Wolfe** and

immediately instigated a feud with Kurt Angle.

"I came to TNA to beat the top competition avail-

able, and Angle fit the bill," Wolfe said. "Once I'm fin-

ished with him, then A.J. Styles is officially on notice."

Wolfe picked the right time to make a run at

Angle, as the **Main Event Mafia** seems to be reeling.

Kevin Nash is embroiled in a feud with **Eric Young**

over the Legends title and **Scott Steiner** has picked a

fight with **Bobby Lashley**. Meanwhile, **Booker T** is

rumored to be headed back to WWE once his TNA

contract expires. Booker has been critical of the

company in recent weeks, and he was removed from

the roster on TNA's website, following his loss at

Bound for Glory where he was taken from the ring

on a stretcher.

Nick Logan won the 13th annual ECWA Super 8

tournament in Newark, Delaware, on October 10,

After nearly two decades of service to WWE, Shane McMahon turned in his letter of resignation. It is still unknown entirely why McMahon, whose tenure officially ends on January 1, 2010, chose to leave or where he will go next.



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P.O. BOX 96, FORT WASHINGTON, PA 19034
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DESTRUCTIVE DUO

Look out! If Vladimir Kozlov and Ezekiel Jackson ever learn how to operate as a team, it will be no time at all before they defeat The Big Show and Chris Jericho for the Unified tag title. "Jerishow" is a formidable team, but they rarely display the destructive power Kozlov and Jackson do. I can't wait to see this epic showdown.

RANDALL BOWMANN
Plano, TX

MISSING EDWARDS

As if losing Bryan Danielson and Nigel McGuinness to WWE weren't bad enough, Eddie



Photo by Joe Zanolie

ROH tag team champion Eddie Edwards recently went down with an elbow injury, but fortunately for Eddie and his fans, the prognosis for Edwards is a relatively quick and thorough recovery.

EARLY SLAMMY NOMINATION

FRANK MANZI
Edison, NJ

Edwards had to injure his elbow. Now my favorite tag team, The American Wolves, is going to be on the shelf for who knows how long. I hope Davey Richards doesn't decide to find another partner while Eddie is out recovering from surgery. Richards and Eddie won the tag team championship together and nobody else but Eddie deserves to wear the belt or defend it.

TNA GROWING PAINS

D.J. SCHONTZ
Rochester, MN

As singles wrestler, however, neither Primo nor Carito come off as anything special. WWE must feel the same way to some extent because we rarely see Primo or Carito wrestling in meaningful matches. If WWE were wise, it would reunite them immediately.

I recently read where TNA President Dixie Carter went on the record as saying she was committed to pushing the younger talent in TNA. The wrestlers she specifically noted were A.J. Styles, Hernandez, and Matt Morgan. While that news is encouraging, I hope it doesn't mean wrestling legends like Sting, Nash, and Scott Steiner will become bit players in the promotion. I agree that young wrestlers must be given a chance to show what they can do, but without the influence of its established wrestlers, TNA is at risk of becoming a glorified independent promotion.

It will be very interesting to see how Carter and TNA strikes the balance between its older and younger superstars.

CHIP WATSON
Los Angeles, CA



Photo by Koichi Yoshizawa

Just as thousands of fans were moved by the sudden death of Mitsuhiro Misawa in June, reader Justin Wick was touched by our tribute to him.

fallen wrestler was nice.

Chris Hero, Samoa Joe, and C.M. Punk support a his tribute show was great. Seeing wrestlers like honor Misawa received from his fans and peers at was legendary. I really thought the overwhelming in magazines gave me enough insight to know he ing video clips on YouTube and following his career I never really saw much of Misawa, but just see-

tributed. his status was so legendary that he deserved a better know Misawa never wrestled for either company, but and TNA hardly acknowledged Misawa's death. I it is terrible that top wrestling companies like WWE for this amazing look at an amazing wrestler. I think Volume 29, 2009). I would like to thank the editors Misawa ("Japan Stunned By Misawa Tragedy" I was reading about the tribute to Mitsuhiro

HONORING A LEGEND

see Evan each week.

ratings because real wrestling fans would tune in to it wouldn't need to rely on special guest hosts to get If WWE signed more wrestlers like Evan Bourne, sporadically.

WWE could want in a wrestler, yet he's only on Raw smart, fearless, and doesn't cheat. He's everything WWE. Evan Bourne brings it all to the ring. He's feel Evan Bourne is being grossly under-used by As a big-time Raw fan, I would like to say that I

NOT ENOUGH EVAN

JUSTIN WICK
wick360@hotmail.com

ting and a master of purosus.

I would like to say farewell to a great legend of wres- friends, and fans of Misawa. He truly was Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair, and Triple-H rolled into one. Finally, I would like to send my condolences to the family,

YOUR LETTERS

CONTENTS

FEATURES

30 Q & A: IVAN KOLOFF

The prototypical Soviet villain spends 90 minutes with Senior Writer Harry Burkett discussing his relationship with Bruno Sammartino, America, nephew Nikita, his ministry, and much, much more

46 REY MYSTERIO JR.: WHY HE IS WWE'S MOST

IMPORTANT WRESTLER

While he may be small in stature and have a Wellness Policy violation against him, Rey Mysterio Jr., by virtue of his popularity with children and Hispanic fans, remains a big part of WWE's future—some would say the biggest part

50 IT'S DANIELSON VS. MCGUINNESS AGAIN!

THIS TIME, HOWEVER, IT'S LONG DISTANCE

For years, Bryan Danielson and Nigel McGuinness fought it out to prove who was ROH's premier wrestler. Now with Danielson in WWE and Nigel in TNA, the battle rages on. Only the location has changed

60 TNA WORLD CHAMPION A.J. STYLES:

THE UNTOLD STORY OF HOW STING SAVED HIS CAREER

There's no question Sting influenced A.J. Styles's decision to not retire. But exactly how he got through to the current TNA World champion hasn't been told ... until now

DEPARTMENTS

4 YOUR LETTERS

6 WHAT'S HAPPENING BY JEFF RUOSS

12 KREW-CUTS WITH FRANK KREWDA

14 ON ASSIGNMENT BY LIZ HUNTER

16 THUMBS UP, THUMBS DOWN

18 POINT/COUNTERPOINT

20 INTRODUCING ... SHANE HASTE

22 WORKIN' STIFF BY AL CASTLE

24 SPOTLIGHT ON ... SAMOA JOE

66 THE WRESTLING ANALYST: DANIELS

72 OFFICIAL WRESTLING RATINGS

74 REMEMBER HIM?



30



46



50

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MILOSZ WACHOWIAK

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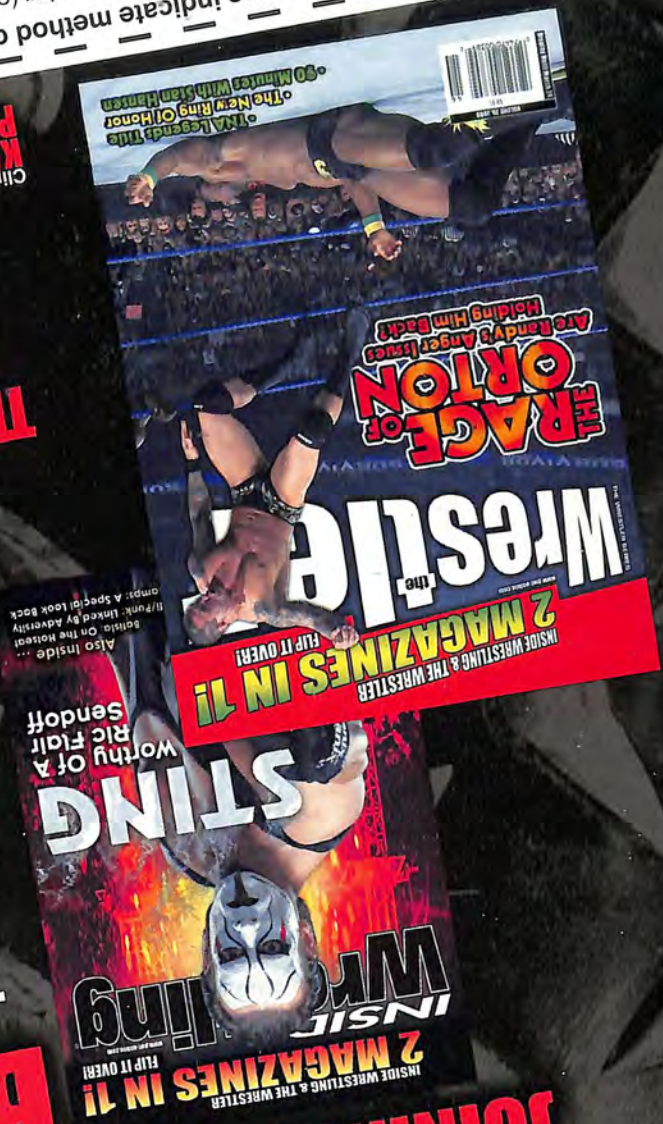
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- The Passing Of Capt. Lou Albano Start
- Danielson's & McGuinness' New Start
- 90 Minutes With Ivan Koloff

THE UNTOLD STORY OF HOW
STING SAVED HIS CAREER

A.J. STYLES

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